Hell Is Dark with No Flowers



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Yoru Michio

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YORU MICHIO

Translation by Taylor Engel
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Afterword

Takamura Ono

A mysterious man dressed in Heian-period clothing. Always there before you notice him.

Seiji Tohno

A college-age NEET. He can see other people's sins at a glance.



Major Characters

Shiroshi Saijou

A beautiful, enigmatic boy who counsels troubled people.

Beniko

A mysterious girl with eyes like black glass.

Odoro Rindou

The famously sharp "Detective Who Summons Death."



Do they come when misfortune calls, or do they bring misfortune with them?

Mystery 1

Aobouzu

In this world, some *oni* may greet you with a mocking smile.

*

Seiji Tohno's life was one long disgrace.

As far as he was concerned, it was no exaggeration to say that all of his twenty-two years had been lived in shame. After all, while he came from a family of fishermen, he hadn't even managed to conquer his seasickness yet, and he was such a lousy swimmer that he could drown in a twenty-five-meter pool. It felt as if he'd gotten something wrong just by being born.

On top of that, he was currently a full-fledged NEET with a triple handicap: no job, no money, and no permanent address.

Even worse, he hadn't chosen his parents' house in their Kanagawa port town to become a shut-in or the low-income, bath-not-included Tokyo apartment he'd rented as a student. No—instead, he was living out of a series of net cafés.

Most of the world used net cafés for just a few hours a day, to rest or kill some time. Not Seiji. He was traveling from one to the next and spending his nights there.

Today marked the second week of his life as a net café nomad.

The going rate in this area was 1,980 yen for a twelve-hour package. That meant if he got in late at night, he could stay until almost noon. But was it comfortable? Hardly. Those recliners were fine if you were just reading manga and sipping a drink, but after a mere five days of trying to sleep in one, his lower back had started screaming.

Thanks to that, Seiji was chronically sleep-deprived, and his mind—which had never worked all that well—had closed up shop and gone on vacation. He'd always been a pretty light sleeper, and if there was a middle-aged guy snoring away somewhere nearby, he'd have to strangle him in order to get any decent rest.

On the worst days, he only started to doze off around five in the morning. He couldn't even count the number of times he'd accidentally overslept and ended up crying over having to pay to extend his time.

What did he do during the day, then? An astonishing amount of nothing.

He just let time go by; he hung out in convenience stores and used bookstores, reading for free, or he checked out street buskers and graded them in his head. By the time night fell, his legs were sore from walking. He hadn't been sweating away at a job, part-time or otherwise, though, so if he'd complained about being tired after bumming around all day, he definitely would have found himself on the receiving end of a lecture.

Up until last year, he'd technically been able to call himself a college student. That said, he'd skipped all the parts most people associated with college, like mixers and club activities, and finally the high-pressure interviews had broken him. He'd stopped leaving his apartment, and even the very last event—job hunting—had sailed right past him.

Apparently, it was possible to be a "roaming job seeker" and remain a respectable adult, but unfortunately, Seiji's parents weren't tolerant or wealthy enough to give him that kind of grace period. As a matter of fact, if they'd known about his current situation, they would have cut him up and fed him to the fish.

"Haaah." He let out a long sigh that was heard only by the porcelain throne.

Seiji was in the single-occupant bathroom of a convenience store in front of the station. He'd done his business, gargled, and was just reaching for his toothbrush case when a reflection slid into view. He flinched, freezing up.

A man with a face like death gazed hollowly back at him from the mirror.

"—!"

He'd managed to choke back his scream, but his heart was still hammering in his chest.

Vacant, unfocused black eyes rimmed with deep, dark circles, their whites clouded and yellow—that haggard face was branded into his memory.

He'd always been very uncomfortable around mirrors.

Shop windows on the street were basically the same thing, so he'd developed the habit of hunching and glaring at his feet as he walked. At this point, mirrors held such terror for him that he couldn't bear to look into one for even a second, and that fear was constricting his daily life.

"Haaaah, not again."

Seiji brushed his teeth around an exasperated sigh, careful to keep his focus on the sink, then left the bathroom.

He could feel his stomach growling, so he grabbed a discount rice ball and headed for the registers. He'd paid and was shoving his few remaining coins into his jacket pocket when the clerk held an unfamiliar box out over the counter.

"Heeere you gooo. Draw a fooortune, pleeeease," the man drawled.

Seiji drew a slip of paper.

"Huh?" When the cashier took it and opened it, a look of startled confusion spread across his face. Hastily refolding the paper, he shoved it back into Seiji's palm as if it were a dead cockroach. "Thank yooou for your buuusiness."

Seiji walked through the automatic door, puzzling over the weird reaction. When he looked up, the sunset seemed to be burning down the sky from its western edge. It was twilight, the time of day when light and dark bled into one another.

Getting curious, he opened the fortune slip and saw a word he hadn't expected:

HELL

Understandably, he was dumbstruck. *Is this even worse than "Terrible Luck" on a fortune? Rock bottom?*

Maybe somebody had slipped it into the box as a prank. So out of all the options, Seiji had just happened to draw that particular fortune? What awful luck… Still, it really was going to be hell from here on out.

His money was just about gone. He'd been spending what he had and earning nothing, so that was no surprise. He didn't even have enough left to stay at a net café tonight. He could

brave the critical looks from the staff and doze the night away at a McDonald's like a student napping in class, but he wouldn't be able to do that for long. Was he finally about to end up on the street? Lately, certain phrases kept flickering at the edges of his mind: *all washed up*, *checkmate*, *nowhere left to go*, *fading to black*…

Come to think of it, he'd heard that some organization served meals to the homeless at a park just down this street during the winter. He didn't know whether they were there every day, but you couldn't beat free food.

Lost in thought without really thinking about anything, Seiji was just starting to wander off when it happened.

Clack.

He heard the sound of a wooden geta sandal on pavement.

"…Huh?"

Turning to look at the source of the sound, he saw a Buddhist monk with one eye in the middle of its forehead. The monster's robe—*Is that the right word for it?*—was dyed blue. In the next moment, that rolling eye had focused on Seiji.

Ya wanna hang yerself?

He read its lips with an ease that seemed unnatural. Then the monster reached out and made a grab for his head.

Shrieking, Seiji scrambled backward. His feet tangled, sending him stumbling into a passerby. "Watch it, moron!" a middle-aged man in a work coverall snarled at him. Seiji hastily gathered his things back up off the ground. He didn't have much—just a shoulder bag packed with spare clothes and a plastic umbrella for when it rained.

Then he saw her.

A neat, well-put-together woman was right there in front of him. She wore a fancy-looking long coat and carried a designer bag. Standing there, completely at ease in her slim-heeled pumps, she looked like a young socialite. As she looked down at Seiji, her eyes seemed vaguely wary. Maybe she thought he was drunk.

A moment later, Seiji realized that she was the true form of the one-eyed monster, and he took to his heels in a panic.

They're back.

His symptoms had started up again.

As far as Seiji was concerned, this was a chronic disease that never got better.

Ever since he was little, he'd sometimes see people around him as monsters.

Like back when he was in grade school, a guy they'd called "the Candy Man" had lived on his school route. When kids stopped by on their way home, he'd beam and give them candy.

Seiji's innate greed had made him a frequent visitor, but one day, he'd just stopped going. The man's plump, smiling face had begun to look like an ugly monster to him.

What he'd seen was a hairy monkey with a bald head and a grin that split its face all the way to its ears. It struck a weird pose with its elbows pressed to its sides, flapping its hands as if imitating a chicken, but when it spoke, its voice was soft and kind:

"It's so good to see you. Come on, come in; there's lots of candy today, just like always."

Needless to say, Seiji had sprinted straight home.

The next day, the drowned body of one of his classmates was discovered in an irrigation canal on the edge of town. At first, the death was thought to have been accidental, but soon after, rumors started to circulate that it had been the work of a pervert, and finally the Candy Man was arrested. He'd taken one of his regular visitors out there and drowned the kid in the canal. The day of Seiji's last visit had been the day his classmate had died.

His next monster encounter happened four years later, right around the New Year.

"Here, Sei. I've got some New Year's money for you."

The arm his aunt had extended had been covered with blinking eyes. Seiji trembled uncontrollably, but he'd managed to keep a death grip on the money and mumble "Thanks" before making his escape.

His aunt had always had sticky fingers, and he later heard that she'd stolen a designer bag from another member of her moms' circle and auctioned it online; naturally, she'd been found out, and a police report was filed. Apparently, she'd whet her appetite shoplifting from supermarkets and had since moved on to all sorts of other crimes. Currently, she was in the middle of a divorce.

The bottom line was that when someone had committed a crime of some sort, they looked like a monster to Seiji. Once he'd figured that out, well, it was obviously best to let sleeping

dogs lie. As soon as he saw a person like that, he booked it in the opposite direction.

The world was filled with monsters in disguise.

“Huh?”

Coming to himself with a jolt, Seiji stopped in his tracks.

…Where was he?

He hadn’t been paying attention, and he’d ended up on a street he didn’t recognize.

He looked around, but he didn’t see any signs with the neighborhood name or street numbers. Black wooden fences that seemed to go on forever stretched away in front of him and behind him. Every house he passed was silent, and there was no one else on the street. No crows cawed; no dogs barked. Even the wind seemed to have fallen still.

It felt as if he’d been set down in a corner of some other world.

“…Great.”

He muttered the word aloud, just to make sure he could. What should he do? This really wasn’t good. Ordinarily, asking someone for directions would have been a decent idea, but he didn’t even see nameplates for any of the houses.

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, he noticed a tunnel covered in Japanese ivy up ahead.

When he got closer, there was a sign that said THIS WAY posted beside the entrance, with an arrow pointing into the tunnel.

“What’s up there?”

Was it a café or something? He didn’t even have the funds for a cup of coffee, but surely they wouldn’t charge him just for asking directions.

There was no time like the present, so into the tunnel he went. A green giant towered just outside the exit— No, that wasn’t it: It was a huge sacred anise tree, at least ten meters tall.

Growing up in the country, he’d heard that the fruit from the sacred anise was extremely poisonous and that its local name, *shikimi*, came from the phrase *ashiki-mi* or “wicked fruit.” The tree’s branches stretched up as if it were embracing the sky, and dappled madder-red light poured down through its leaves. Below the tree, as if hiding in its shade, stood a European mansion.

“What the—?”

Was it a Western-style café? No, there was no way. With such a sense of grandeur, it had to be at least several decades old. It might even be worthy of cultural property–level status.

Feeling as if his body had been bewitched by a fox spirit, Seiji went through the open gate. At the end of the brick front walk, there was a set of double doors with stained glass windows. One of those doors was standing open, as if in invitation. A paper sign posted above the door said PLEASE COME IN.

For some reason it made him think of the “people-eating place” from Kenji Miyazawa’s short story *The Restaurant of Many Orders*.

“Um, hello?” Seiji called out, poking his head in like a timid tortoise.

“Welcome.”

The voice spoke so suddenly that he jumped. A girl in a kimono stood in the entryway, in front of an L-shaped staircase. She must’ve been, what, seventeen or eighteen? Her kimono was scarlet; her obi, black satin. Black and vermilion, like lacquer and red ocher. Her black hair was trimmed into a neat shoulder-length bob that simply looked right on her.

“You are our twenty-third guest. Follow me, please.”

“—!”

Seiji gulped. It was her eyes: The dark irises were astonishingly large. The whites weren’t even visible, as if her eye sockets had been set with black glass.

“Um, so…”

But the girl had already turned away and started walking. It seemed too late to say that he was lost and had just been passing by.

“Hmm?”

As they went down a hallway that extended to the right, they passed a goldfish bowl sitting in a bay window. The occupant’s scales were scarlet, and its black-edged fin was shaped like a butterfly. A *torachoubi* goldfish. Seiji remembered seeing those at the goldfish shop when he was little, in a tank that had a MOST EXPENSIVE PRODUCT tag stuck to it.

Huh? Wait…

Between those black eyes and its coloring, the goldfish bore a striking resemblance to the girl he was following.

“It’s Beniko. I’ve brought a guest.”

Startled, he looked up. The girl had just knocked on a door at the end of the hall.

“Oh! Um, actually—”

If he missed his chance here, he wouldn’t get another one.

Just as Seiji hastily tried to state his business, the girl pivoted to face him. Her black eyes seemed to run him through, and he flinched and fell silent. Taking a step back, she bowed, prompting him. “This is as far as I will take you. Please go in.”

For some reason, he got the feeling that cutting and running would not be tolerated.

Fighting the urge to cry internally, Seiji reached for the doorknob.

Who was waiting in there? He was anticipating a crotchety old gentleman, but his expectations were betrayed the moment he opened the door.

“Huh?”

The room looked like a study.

The right-hand wall was monopolized by bookshelves that reached nearly to the ceiling. Most of the wall in front of him was taken up by French doors, and the drapes that hung from the ceiling resembled theater curtains.

In the center of the room, a Persian rug lay under a table with cat’s-paw cabriole legs. There was something plantlike about the curved lines of the chair backs; Seiji was pretty sure that style of furniture was called Queen Anne.

The room’s master was sitting in one of those chairs.

A kid…?

The boy looked no older than fifteen or sixteen. He had black hair and eyes, and like the girl who’d shown Seiji in, he was dressed in traditional clothes: a kimono in a gray so pale it was almost white, with a cascade of ombre-dyed white peonies blooming from one shoulder all the way down to the hem.

He was so beautiful it was scary. His fair skin was nearly the color of snow, so that the boy himself almost looked like a single peony.

The peony—the king of a thousand flowers.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Please, take a seat.”

His voice sounded as young as he looked, but he spoke like someone much older.

Seiji obediently sat down in one of the chairs, then came back to himself with a jolt. “Oh, um, I— Hrnn?”

His throat had closed up, and he couldn’t get the words out.

Had his vocal cords gotten weaker? Net cafés didn’t require much talking. Even paying was basically silent, and beverages came from a drink bar at the touch of a button. Organs atrophy when they aren’t used, so maybe this was just a natural consequence.

As Seiji started to get flustered, the boy gave him an angelic smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Shiroshi Saijou.”

“*Koff !* N-nice to meet you. Um, I’m Seiji Tohno. Uh…”

“You’ve lost your way, haven’t you? It’s all right. I’ll draw you a map as soon as we’re done here. First, though, would you care for a cup of tea?”

“Wh-what?”

Apparently, he was being invited to a late-afternoon tea.

“People often get lost in this neighborhood, you see. I’d just finished my book and was feeling rather bored. Do join me.”

There was a leather-bound tome from somewhere foreign on the table near the boy. He couldn’t possibly have read that whole thing, could he? Maybe he only looked young; he might actually be older than Seiji.

“N-no, I, um, I think there was…something I needed to, uh…”

It seemed like a shame to refuse an invitation, but he was too self-conscious to sit down to a meal with someone he’d just met, one-on-one. As he was trying to decline, though, his stomach growled rudely.

With exquisite timing, the girl who’d said her name was Beniko arrived wheeling a cart. It held a pot of black tea, which was clearly expensive judging by the smell, and freshly baked apple pie.

Sometimes you just didn’t have a choice. Accepting the invitation, Seiji picked up his fork.

The crisp texture of pie crust and the sweet, juicy tartness of stewed apples instantly filled his mouth. The weight of the succulent fruit settling in his stomach was enough to make him sob for joy.

Unable to stop himself, he asked for seconds, before a stifled chuckle caught his ear.

“Ah, forgive me. I’ve never seen someone have another helping under these circumstances before.”

With a start, Seiji remembered where he was. “Um… Is this a restaurant or something?”

He’d already put away two pieces of apple pie. If they asked him to pay, he’d have to dine and dash.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing like that. Due to reasons I won’t go into right now, I provide a proxy service for ———.”

“Uh?” Damn, he hadn’t caught that last bit. But Seiji didn’t have the conversational skills to casually ask the boy to repeat himself, so instead he chose a different follow-up. “Speaking of proxy services, you do hear a lot about chauffeur services and housekeeping services these days, huh?”

“Mm, this is really closer to outsourcing. They hire me to perform a certain service for them on an ad hoc basis.”

“So it’s a public service?”

“Yes, well, since it’s provided equally to everyone, including politicians and billionaires, I suppose one could call it ‘public.’”

“……Uhhh?”

That had been an extremely roundabout choice of words. What exactly did he mean by that?

“Think of it as a free consultation office. In today’s day and age, the term ‘counseling’ may be more apropos.”

“Huh… A consultation service?”

On the table, hot tea swirled languidly in a white porcelain cup. Realizing he was about to catch a glimpse of its surface, Seiji hastily averted his eyes.

Right— That was a mirror, too.

“Um, go ahead and take this with a grain of salt, but…”

Seiji went on, telling the boy the secret of his eye.

The fact that, every so often, other people looked like monsters to him. The stories about the Candy Man and his thieving aunt. It sounded like a fantasy, except for the fact that it was too tasteless for a descriptor like that, but the boy only nodded and listened to him intently.

Seiji had brought this up because he knew he’d never come here again. However—

“I may know what your monsters are,” Shiroshi said unexpectedly.

“Huh?! R-really?!”

Getting up, the boy took a volume from a bookshelf. It looked like a large artbook of sorts.

“This is a collection of pictures of yokai, drawn by an Edo-period artist known as Toriyama Sekien. The edition I have here contains *The Illustrated Demon Horde’s Night Parade* and its sequel, *The Illustrated Demon Horde from Past and Present, Continued*. My copy is a reprinting of the original, though.”

His pale fingers turned the pages.

There were yokai of all shapes and sizes, accompanied by their names and explanatory text. It seemed more like an illustrated guide than an artbook, and the lively, undulating ink lines looked more humorous than frightening… Not that Seiji had any eye for art.

“Now, back to the topic at hand. Look at this picture, if you would.”

“Oh!”

Seiji was so startled his voice deserted him.

Shiroshi was pointing at a comical bald yokai. It stood in an unsteady, chicken-like pose, and a grin split its face from ear to ear. It looked just like the Candy Man.

The name beside it was—

“Hyosube?”

“It’s considered a type of *kappa* or water goblin; it was modeled on a gibbon and is known to resemble a young priest covered in thick hair. Although it looks quite droll, it’s said to pull passing children into the water and drown them, just like the *kappa*.”

…Huh? It drags kids into the water and kills them?

Feeling a spark of recognition, Seiji started thinking. At the same time, Shiroshi began leafing through the book again. The next yokai looked like a woman whose arms were covered in eyes—*dodomeki*. This one was the spitting image of Seiji’s aunt.

“As you can see, this is a female yokai whose arms are speckled with countless birds’ eyes. Long ago, a ‘bird’s eye’ was the popular term for a coin with a hole bored through its center. The *dodomeki* represents a pickpocket who’s committed so much petty theft that she’s grown a hundred such eyes on her arms.”

This was basically the same as his aunt, then.

If the man who’d drowned the child in the irrigation canal had turned into a *hyosube*, and the aunt who’d been divorced for her kleptomania had become a *dodomeki*, then…

“In short, Seiji, your eye seems to detect hidden sins by perceiving the individuals who’ve committed them as yokai,” Shiroshi said quite simply. “Some scholars claim that yokai were originally the darkness of the human heart made visible: resentment, hatred, envy… At their core, yokai may be mirrors that reflect the evil lurking in the world.”

That sounded deeply significant, but Seiji didn’t really understand it. When he made a noncommittal noise just to show that he was listening, Shiroshi gave a little laugh. “Still, you’re quite like a yokai as well.”

“H-h-how come?!” He was so shaken that his voice cracked.

Even though Seiji was clearly rattled, Shiroshi kept chuckling. “There’s one that’s just like you in this book.”

The page he turned to showed something that looked like a bad-guy version of Anpanman. No, that wasn’t right— The thing in the picture was a round mirror with a human face, another type of yokai. Its name was apparently *ungaikyou*.

“Of all beings considered to be the spirits of objects, mirror spirits are the oldest. The *ungaikyou* is one such being. It’s the yokai form of the Mirror of Illumination, a magic looking glass that unmasks the true shapes of demons and the evil worked by humans.”

“A…mirror?” Seiji echoed.

Even as he said it, a distant memory came back to him.

He must’ve been about five. He had been playing by himself in the park when, all of a sudden, glittering mirror fragments had begun falling from the sky. Running would have been the smartest move, but like most five-year-olds, his brain hadn’t been all that sharp yet.

It was the prettiest thing he’d ever seen, and so he’d reached out toward the shards. In an attempt to follow the streaks of light, he’d opened his eyes as wide as they’d go.

Then one of those shining fragments had fallen into his left eye—

“Aaaaaah!”

Of course. His eye had definitely hurt. However, when he’d run home in tears, his parents hadn’t been able to find a mark on him, and they’d belted him for making a fuss over nothing. As a result, he’d always assumed it had been some sort of daydream, but what if…?

“Yes, I believe those fragments were from the Mirror of Illumination.”

Come to think of it, he’d started seeing monsters right about then. That probably made this the likeliest explanation, but…

“I-it can’t be. That’s completely unrealistic.”

“Heh-heh. Deny it all you like, but your left eye still has that curious power. Don’t you think you should put it to good use?” He sounded entertained; young Shiroshi didn’t seem to be deeply invested in Seiji’s problem.

“But… How?”

Joining the police force would probably be the most effective move. He’d be able to identify criminals just by looking at them. Still, there was no way he had what it took to become a civil servant.

He could call in reports as a private citizen, but saying, *Hello, yes, that person over there seems to be doing something bad*, and when questioned, following up with *Because they look like a yokai* would only earn him pitying looks and directions to the nearest hospital.

In any case, writing *I can see people’s sins at a glance* down in the “Hobbies/Special Talents” section of his job applications would not win over anyone in HR.

“Hmm. Let’s see. To start with, why not work for me part-time?”

“Huh?”

“When people come to this house, you’ll tell me what they look like to you. What could be easier?”

Shiroshi certainly made it sound straightforward, but would it really be that simple?

“Well, but—”

“You’d be guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter, of course. You’ll have hot meals and a warm bed, and I’ll provide you with an allowance on top of that. I’ll also pay proper wages for any work you do.”

“H-hang on a minute!” Unable to take it anymore, Seiji called a time-out.

“What is it?” Shiroshi looked puzzled.

“Why are you just assuming I’d be living here?!”

“Oh, is that all? You appear to be living out of net cafés, so I thought it would be best to provide accommodations as well.”

“H-how do you know that?!”

The boy had called it in one, and Seiji's eyes widened.

Shiroshi raised his index finger. "First, the umbrella. It last rained five days ago. There wasn't a cloud in the sky today, but you're still carrying yours. It seems appropriate to assume that, while you may have an umbrella, you have no place to store it. In other words, you're compelled to move frequently and have no permanent address."

"Ngh!"

"Next, your bag. There's a mineral water bottle sticking out of the side holder, but it's been refilled with orange juice. Not many people reuse bottles that way, so I would imagine you've been carrying an empty bottle with you and filling it at drink bars."

"Ack!"

"In addition, the strap of your cell phone is hanging out of your right-hand jacket pocket. The fact that you're keeping it easily accessible suggests that you're still able to use it. It has service, and you've been in an environment where you can keep it charged. In other words…" Shiroshi paused to smile at Seiji. "The likeliest explanation is that you are living in net cafés, one step away from being homeless. And you haven't been doing so for long: two weeks at most."

"Wh-wh-wha—?!"

Flabbergasted, Seiji gaped like an oxygen-starved goldfish.

"I apologize if I've offended you. This is just who I am," Shiroshi said coolly, raising his second cup of tea to his lips.

The words sounded good, but he didn't look at all apologetic. What was up with that? Or no, maybe what Seiji should really be regretting was the fact that he was transparent enough that someone he'd just met could see right through him.

"My, it looks as if our next guest is here already."

When Seiji hastily turned around, he found himself looking at a familiar face.

"Ah!" he yelped in surprise.

It was the woman he'd seen outside the convenience store. Her sophisticated, upper-class impression couldn't have been a better match for that study.

The moment he blinked, she transformed into that one-eyed, blue-robed monk, then changed back.

"Oh." She seemed to remember him, too. "Um, who is this?"

“My assistant, Seiji Tohno. Consider him part of the furniture.”

What a cold introduction.

In any case, after an exchange like the one he’d had with Shiroshi earlier, teatime promptly resumed with the addition of the new guest.

Was this kid actually an expert pickup artist?

“Consultations…?” The woman had introduced herself as Satsuki Otose, and when Shiroshi told her his work was “rather like a consultation service,” she looked intrigued. “What sort of consultations do you take?”

“All sorts. No issue is too minor. After all, if it’s stuck in your throat, even a small fish bone will hurt until it’s removed.”

“Then, um… This is really nothing, but…,” Satsuki began apologetically. “You see, I have a blog called *Flowers of Avalon*.”

Seiji was struck by a sense of familiarity. There it was: His brain had tried to hear *Flowers for Algernon* and missed.

“I post recipes and journal entries, things like that. After I was interviewed by a magazine, traffic to my blog increased almost overnight, and people began to submit lots of emails and comments. They’ve been mostly all positive, but there was one that…”

When she held her smartphone out with her left hand, the diamond in her wedding ring glittered.

The screen showed an email inbox. She clicked on one of the messages, opening it. Both the subject line and the message field were blank, but there was an image attached.

The moment she opened the attachment, a soft “Oh-ho…” escaped Shiroshi. “That certainly is peculiar.”

“Whoa, no kidding.” Peeking in from the side, Seiji grimaced.

They were looking at a line of text that read:

Want to hang yourself?

The characters seemed to have been scrawled on a sheet of loose-leaf notebook paper, then photographed with a digital camera or smartphone. That would have been unsettling enough, but on top of that—

“I see. Mirror writing, hmm?”

The scribbled letters were flipped, left to right. Reflected in a mirror, they would have appeared normal.

“As you can imagine, I was disturbed. I immediately blocked the sender, but it was resent from a different address, and that kept happening every time I blocked it.”

Satsuki sighed quietly. Seiji realized she probably wasn’t getting enough sleep; there were faint dark circles under her eyes. She seemed worn out.

“Do you have any idea who the sender might be?”

“No, none at all,” she said, blinking rather dramatically.

“Did you respond?”

“I ignored it. I thought that paying it any attention would just encourage whoever had sent it.”

“A wise decision. Have you spoken to the police about it?”

“Not yet. My blog is only a hobby, and I didn’t want to get the police involved when there’s been no actual damage. I would hate to shut my blog down because I was overreacting to a prank.”

“I understand. So am I correct in assuming you don’t want to stop blogging?”

“That’s right. I’ve made lots of friends through this, and the blog has fans who visit every day.”

Forget a blog, Seiji wasn’t even on Line or Twitter. As a result, he didn’t really get it, but maybe that was how it usually went.

And yet…

Sure, getting an ominous email didn’t mean she’d immediately be murdered, but wasn’t the message too unsettling to write off as a prank?

Shiroshi tugged lightly on his jacket sleeve. When Seiji gave him a quizzical look, he held out a book. It was the yokai artbook from earlier. *You want me to put it away?* Seiji asked silently, but he got a wry smile in response: *No, not that.* When Shiroshi tapped the table of contents with his fingernail, Seiji finally got it. He started turning pages.

There it was.

Keeping the book open to that page, he passed it back to Shiroshi. The picture showed a one-eyed monk standing in front of a dilapidated thatched hut. The name beside it was *aobouzu*.

“Yes, that makes sense,” Shiroshi murmured as if he were talking to himself.

“Pardon?” Satsuki looked perplexed.

“Let me ask once more: You really have no idea who the sender might be?”

Satsuki blinked again in that exaggerated way. “No, I don’t,” she said curtly, shaking her head. Something about her attitude seemed odd. Then, awkwardly, she averted her eyes. “Actually, there’s something I should have mentioned earlier.”

“What is it?”

“I haven’t gotten one of those messages in the past four months.”

Frankly, that was a bit of an anticlimax.

From what Satsuki said, the emails had shown up at least once every three days, and then they’d just stopped coming.

Didn’t that mean the problem was solved? On the surface, it seemed like this case was all wrapped up.

“Yes, that was what I thought as well. And yet… I still have this sense of foreboding. Like I need to do something, or I’ll end up miserable. Like something irreparable will happen to me.” Satsuki’s face was taut and worried, but then she forced a smile, laughing at herself. “I sound strange, don’t I? Even I don’t think it makes sense. My first pregnancy may have made my emotions rather fragile.”

Shiroshi blinked as if she’d surprised him. “My, you’re expecting?”

“Yes, I’m in my fifth month. I was just on my way to visit my obstetrician.”

A soft smile formed on her lips. The hand she pressed to her belly seemed even gentler than a mother bird caring for an egg.

She looked happy.

Huh?

Just then, Seiji got a vague feeling that something was off. He couldn’t figure out what it was, though. Was it just his imagination?

“I’m sorry for telling you such an odd story. I just haven’t been able to talk to anyone about it.”

“Not even your husband?” Shiroshi asked.

Wincing, Satsuki lowered her eyes. “My husband has been acting strange,” she began, then hesitated, pausing for a moment. “He’s begun to smoke more heavily than normal lately. I’ve told him over and over that it’s bad for the baby, but he never really listens.”

“That must be frustrating.”

“He doesn’t seem to understand that he’s about to be a father. He is a man, so perhaps that’s inevitable to some extent, but sometimes I feel as if he’s distancing himself from this child.”

Her husband, Ryousuke Otose, was an up-and-coming graphic designer.

Due to the nature of his work, he regularly pulled all-nighters. So when they got married, they’d promised one another to spend his few days off eating out at restaurants or shopping together. Lately, though, her husband had just been going out on his own instead.

Her biggest concern was his careless attitude toward their child. When she tried to talk to him about things for the baby, he’d respond with a half-hearted “Yeah” or “Uh-huh,” and when it was really bad, he’d cut her off with an irritated growl.

It was almost like he thought his wife was pregnant with some sort of monster.

“Could he be—?” Seiji almost said *cheating* but hastily stopped himself. Extra stress during pregnancy wasn’t good. “Maybe it’s that ‘maternity blues’ stuff?”

“Um, I think it would be ‘paternity blues’ for men.”

This always happened when he tried using foreign terms he wasn’t used to.

“Well, I can see how you’d want to clear up as many worries as possible,” Seiji continued. “So, Satsuki, you want Shiroshi to find the culprit?”

“No, thank you. On the contrary, I’d like to leave the matter of that email alone for now. I don’t want to risk disturbing anything.”

“Huh? But you said it was troubling you.”

“Yes, so I was wondering if there was any way to set my mind at ease.”

That didn’t make much sense.

Apparently Seiji wasn’t the only one who thought so. With a clink of porcelain on porcelain, Shiroshi returned his teacup to its saucer. “That’s quite odd,” he said. “All alone in the house, pregnant, your husband away. If you felt a sense of foreboding under those circumstances, wouldn’t you ordinarily assume your instincts were trying to alert you to something?”

“Huh? Uh…”

“In the end, you don’t know who sent those emails. The sender could be lying in wait for you at this very moment.

Didn’t the thought ever cross your mind?”

“E-excuse me, I really must be going—”

Satsuki hastily rose from her chair, but Shiroshi caught her hand, stopping her. “You *do* know who the sender is, don’t you?”

“What?”

“You had your suspicions all along. Your behavior implies you’re aware of their current situation, and you’re certain they won’t be able to harm you.”

“How rude! I have no idea who’d send me threatening emails!” Temper flaring, Satsuki raised her voice.

As gently as if he were releasing a struggling butterfly, Shiroshi let go of her hand. “For starters, that sentence itself doesn’t quite constitute a threat,” he murmured, tilting his head to one side. “At first glance, the phrase ‘Want to hang yourself?’ does appear to be a threat—something akin to ‘Die’ or ‘I’ll kill you’; however, strictly speaking, it’s an invitation. The latter is an order or statement of intent, while the former lets the recipient decide whether to accept or refuse.”

Now that he mentioned it, he was right.

“One might even interpret it as an invitation to hang yourself with the sender. If, for example, the sender was male, it could be proposing a lovers’ suicide—”

Immediately, Satsuki stood up, her face pale. “This is offensive. I’m leaving!”

As she pulled her designer bag over her shoulder, its bottom connected with her teacup. By the time Seiji’s surprise had registered, a bright scarlet stain had spread across the table. Startled, Satsuki looked back momentarily, a shocked expression on her face, before turning and leaving the room.

“What the heck…?”

What was that all about? Shiroshi’s remarks had been pretty rude, but the woman’s anger had seemed like an overreaction. No, more importantly—

“What kind of yokai is an *aobouzu*?”

Asking the walking encyclopedia in front of him seemed faster than checking through the book.

“Hmm,” Shiroshi said, thinking for a moment. “That’s a good question; it’s rather difficult to describe in general terms. The legend varies from region to region, yet all variants describe it as a large monk in a blue robe.”

“Huh… Okay.”

“In the folklore of Kagawa Prefecture, however, we find the following anecdote…”

One day at noon, while a young childminder was alone in the house with her charge, a blue monk appeared who repeatedly asked her if she wanted to hang herself. Growing annoyed, the girl ignored him, but just like that, the monk caught her, knocked her out, and hanged her.

“He sounds like your basic phantom killer.”

In the end, some of the neighbors had heard the baby crying and rescued the girl, or so the story went. Still, any yokai that forcibly strung you up by the neck was pretty terrifying. That aside—

“That ‘Ya wanna hang yerself’ line sounds just like the email, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. The way she chose to ignore it and refuse to respond is the same as well.”

Did that mean someone was going to hang Satsuki? A chill shuddered down Seiji’s spine, but then something struck him as odd. “Wait… This seems weird. From what Satsuki said, it sounded like she was just a victim, but…”

Shiroshi’s working theory was that Seiji’s left eye revealed the hidden sins of whoever it looked at. If the *aobouzu* indicated a crime Satsuki had committed, it would mean that she was a criminal as well.

“I’m not certain of that. At the very least, I do think she’s hiding something. Part of that ‘something’ may be a sin of which we’re not yet aware.” Shiroshi chuckled. It wasn’t a nice laugh. “Now then, Seiji, I have a favor to ask you.”

No sooner had he spoken than Beniko reappeared with the tea wagon and set a laptop on the table. It was the very latest model, of course.

“I’d like you to locate Satsuki’s blog.”

“…Sure, but…”

The client had walked out on them. Did they even have the right to pry into this further?

“I can’t abide leaving anything unfinished. Naturally, I’ll pay you for your time. How does two thousand yen per hour sound?”

“! I’ll start looking right away!”

In the spirit of striking while the iron was hot, Seiji booted up the computer and started typing keywords into a search engine. It didn't take him long to find it.

The blog was updated every three days. There were health-conscious recipes, such as Refreshing Vegetable Sandwiches on Specialty Whole Wheat Bread and Fresh Pasta with Herbs and Tomatoes, with a few essay-style journal posts sprinkled here and there.

Satsuki and her husband lived in a luxury apartment in the heart of Tokyo. There were photos of them as an apparently happy couple, a collection of modern Scandinavian furniture, a long trip through Europe. It was the sort of affluent life the world envied.

The blog did appear to be quite popular. Each post had positive comments on it, such as *You and your husband look so happy* and *I would love to live like this*.

And yet…

"It's a bit dull, isn't it?" Young Shiroshi was unimpressed. "None of the posts give you a sense of her own values or aesthetics. It seems to be a curated collection of all the things society in general considers 'happiness.'"

"Huh… Yeah, I guess it does feel a little like that."

But wasn't that normal these days?

"All right. I have one more request for you, Seiji. Find out if anything odd happened to Satsuki. It's likely to have been about four months ago."

"Why four months?"

"Because that is when the unpleasant emails stopped—and also when Satsuki fell pregnant."

That answer was a bit cryptic. The two things seemed unconnected to Seiji, but like the old saying goes, *It's hard to tell a poor thinker from a sleeping one*. All else aside, he was earning two thousand yen an hour.

"Oh, found something. What about this?"

According to the post, Satsuki had had her college reunion four months ago. Technically, the information wasn't in the post itself but in one of the comments.

Looking forward to seeing you at the reunion tomorrow. Let's all sing the school song together. It's been too long since I really drank, so let's go wild!

The comment seemed to have been left by a classmate, someone named Saori Toribeno. That sounded like it might be her actual name.

“Would you try running a search for that name?”

“On it. Oh, there she… Huh? A horror blog?”

The blog was called *Horror Editor, Coming Through!*

Apparently, Saori was a writer for an occult monthly magazine; she collected real-life scary stories through interviews, then compiled them into books. She’d put out a call for stories to readers of her blog as well, and she met with and interviewed people whose anecdotes she’d decided to include. She was a pretty enthusiastic worker.

“You ask me, it’s kind of a creepy blog.”

Even the design was ominous. Her interviews seemed to cover this area, too, and incredibly, the park where they served those free meals was showcased as “The Suicide Bathroom.”

According to the post, an elderly homeless woman had hanged herself in a public restroom in the park, and ever since, similar suicides kept happening there. Strangely, no notes were ever found. It was almost as if people had been possessed by the old woman’s ghost and had hanged themselves before they knew what was happening.

Yikes!

Shuddering, Seiji was about to quietly leave the page when—

“Hmm? Wait just a moment,” Shiroshi said, stopping him. His eyes were focused on the last blog entry, and his gaze was surprisingly serious.

“…The Detective Who Summons Death?”

It was less like a scary story than the summary of an urban legend that had been popular on social media at one point. Somewhere in Tokyo, it said, there was an extremely sharp private detective who occasionally went to murder scenes and solved incidents on request from the Metropolitan Police Department.

Always right on the money. Quick, ingenious solutions. He definitely qualified as a master detective.

However, after the incidents were solved, someone invariably died. That “someone” was nearly always the bad guy, the person who’d been identified as the criminal.

Huh? That’s weird.

Online stories were notoriously unreliable to begin with, and this one seemed like patently ridiculous gossip. Even so, Seiji felt something cold crawl up his spine. As he was puzzling over it, out of nowhere, Shiroshi spoke. “I’ve got a bad feeling about that.”

“Huh? You too? It is strangely creepy, isn’t it?”

“Not that; it just reminded me of a slightly troublesome acquaintance of mine.”

“…Don’t tell me you actually know this detective.”

“Heh-heh-heh. I really couldn’t say. Either way, he is someone it’s much better not to know.”

Mentally knocking on wood, Seiji closed the page. He was curious about the details on that, but it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Well, in any case: mission accomplished.

“Fine work—you did well. I believe I’ll ask Beniko to set up an appointment for me.”

Then wouldn’t it have been better to have Beniko do this in the first place?

Thinking it was one thing, but saying it aloud could cost him his wages, so he kept his mouth shut. Silent pheasants don’t get shot.

“Now then, it’s time we had dinner. Are you fond of cattle?”

“I’m crazy about them! As long as we slice them up into beef !”

“Why don’t we have sukiyaki, then?”

“I bet nothing could make the cow happier!”

The beef sukiyaki tasted like paradise, and that was putting it mildly. If it meant he’d be turned into something that tasty, he’d have no regrets about coming back as a cow in his next life.

After the feast, Seiji was given one of the guest rooms to stay in. As someone who’d had nowhere to go just a little while earlier, he couldn’t have been more grateful.

The house seemed to have been furnished in two styles: traditional Japanese to the left of the entrance hall and European to the right. The room Seiji had been assigned was a Western-style one on the far right side of the second floor, while the baths on the far left side of the first floor were purely Japanese. As he soaked in the sort of cypress wood tub he would have expected to find at a traditional inn, it felt so good that he

found himself groaning like a squashed frog. It felt like his soul would be rinsed away along with the grime and dirt.

When he got out of the bath, the clothes he'd shucked off had been collected as if it should be expected in a place like this, and a new set was waiting for him.

His mood had been completely reset. And so, of course, he woke up feeling fantastic the next morning.

"Good morning, Seiji. You have some very memorable bed head again today."

"…It just does what it wants."

They ate in the study, as they had the day before. The table was covered with omelets, pancakes, and other Western-style dishes. As he was cheerfully putting away a piping-hot pancake, Shiroshi broke the silence.

"Were your accommodations comfortable? If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to mention it."

If Seiji had been a three-year-old kid, he would have immediately started yelling, *Adopt me!* Sadly, he was a twenty-two-year-old kid, so he limited himself to asking if there were seconds on the pancakes.

Once they'd finished eating, Shiroshi started another conversation.

"By the way, Seiji. Regarding the matter of Satsuki…"

Apparently, he'd managed to get an appointment with the editor, Saori Toribeno. He said they'd arranged to meet at a café in front of the station in a little while, but—

"If possible, I'd like you to join us."

"Huh? What should I do, specifically?"

"Well, let's see. Do you think you could sit beside me and nod with a knowing look on your face?"

Right, that settled it: He'd bravely go full-on yes-man.

Three hours later, they were on their way to the café. Although Beniko ordinarily did the driving, she happened to be away on other business that day, so they called a taxi to take them instead.

The majority of the café's customers were women, and as a pair of young men—one of whom was a beautiful kid in traditional clothing—they stood out whether they wanted to or not. Seiji could feel people sneaking glances at them from all directions.

"We're here to meet someone. Ms. Toribeno."

“Oh, yes, she’s sitting at a table in the back. Follow me, please.”

The table for four already had a cup of black tea sitting on it. The woman who’d been waiting rose smoothly to her feet and nodded to them. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Saori Toribeno. And you must be Shiroshi Saijou, correct?”

She was dressed in a suit, and her long hair was tied back. Seiji didn’t see a trace of the ghastliness he’d expected from her job title; she looked like a very serious office worker.

Giving them a classic customer-service smile, she offered them her card. After they’d finished their brief introductions, she said, “Thank you for your email yesterday. The story you submitted was very intriguing, and I’d love to hear the details.”

“I’m sorry. As it happens, I owe you an apology,” Shiroshi began honestly, giving a light bow. He confessed that the story he’d submitted had been a complete fiction: He’d actually arranged to meet with Saori because he’d wanted to ask her a few questions.

“I see…” Saori resettled herself in her chair, looking bewildered. After thinking in silence for a few moments, she said, “I did think that was too polished for a reader submission. No wonder. So it was bait to get me to meet with you, then?”

“I really am sorry. There were a few questions I needed to ask you regarding Satsuki Otose.”

Saori’s face went blank. “…Did something happen to her?”

“Are you aware of the malicious emails that were sent to her?”

He’d asked the question out of the blue, and the woman blinked as if she’d been caught off guard. “What? Yes, I know about those. Is that why you’re investigating? I don’t think Satsuki was all that concerned about them, though.”

“Oh, really?”

“When it comes down to it, she’s basically just bragging. ‘My blog’s big enough that I get nasty emails.’ Some people are like that, you know: They’ll come to you for help with a stalker, but all they really want is for you to know how popular they are.”

“My, that’s quite a scathing assessment.”

Seiji thought he knew what she meant, though. The various posts on that blog could easily have been written just to showcase how happy Satsuki was.

“So you’re a detective, then? Did Satsuki hire you personally?”

“No, it isn’t like that.”

“So that means it was someone else… Who? Her husband?”

“I’ll leave that up to your imagination.”

“Oh yeah? That’s pretty cagey of you.” Saori raised one eyebrow ironically, looking unamused.

But she didn’t reject Shiroshi outright. He looked like the high-born son of a distinguished family, and she probably wasn’t sure how she should treat him. Conversely, Seiji was used to getting treated more casually than a tissue.

“By the way, Saori, are you familiar with the content of those emails?”

“No, not at all. Satsuki didn’t really want to talk about that.”

Shiroshi described them to her.

“…Mirror writing?” she echoed. A thought suddenly seemed to occur to her. After a little hesitation, she said, “It might have been Junya.”

It sounded like she had a theory about the culprit.

“He’s Satsuki’s ex-fiancé. Junya Sakuma. The three of us were in the same seminar in college.”

“What makes you think it was him?”

“The mirror writing. Junya was particularly good at it; he used to do it for us at drinking parties. Satsuki would have thought of him, too, of course, but—”

“But she pretended she hadn’t. I see. So it’s almost like a signature.”

Since the message could be passed on to the police, he hadn’t been able to sign it, so he’d used mirror writing to hint at his identity instead.

“If you don’t mind, would you go into more detail about that?”

“Sure. I think you’d hear the same things no matter who told you.” Saori shrugged, speaking with surprising frankness. Taking a smartphone from her leather tote bag, she held it out to them across the table. “This is a photo from our class camping trip. We were at a campground in Nagano.”

The photo seemed like a textbook example of what a normal, happy group of people should look like. No matter how hard he tried, Seiji could never have joined that group. The man in the center had an arm around Satsuki’s shoulders, so he was

probably Junya. He was handsome and seemed like he'd been brought up well, but there was a striking sense of loneliness about him.

"He's quite an attractive young man."

"To tell you the truth, lots of girls secretly had their sights set on him. Junya hadn't had eyes for anyone but Satsuki since high school, though."

"Oh, you've known each other that long?"

"Yes, it was a prep school that took boarders. Both Satsuki and Junya came from families that were less than ideal; that may have been what drew them to each other."

They must have been a good match. The way they leaned into each other in the photo almost seemed like a symbol of happiness. In that case, the question that was suddenly on his mind was—

"What caused them to break up?"

"Well, it's rather uncomfortable to talk about, but…" In contrast to what she was saying, Saori sounded quite cheerful. She leaned over the table slightly. "Junya got abusive."

"My, that's surprising."

"He really doesn't seem like the type, does he? It came on all of a sudden during our senior year."

"Was there some sort of trigger?"

"I think the direct cause was stress over what he'd do after graduation. In May, Junya was informally offered a position at a major corporation, but he suddenly decided he wanted to go to graduate school instead. Publicly, Satsuki was supportive, but Junya felt pressured by the entrance exams and started taking it out on her…"

What an awful story.

"Junya denied it from start to finish, though. He said he'd been disciplined very harshly as a child; his parents had hit him, so he'd never do anything like that to anybody. As a matter of fact, he'd gone to boarding school specifically to get away from his parents. That meant nobody around them knew what to think at first."

Saori had probably been one of the people who'd believed him. She seemed to be fighting the pain of an old wound.

"That changed when Satsuki ran into my apartment with a swollen cheek. She said Junya had been sleeping on the sofa,

and when she'd tried to wake him, he'd told her to shut up and just hit her out of nowhere."

"That's terrible."

"Yes, her left cheek was swollen, and there was a cut. When traces of blood were found on the silver ring Junya wore on his right hand, the abuse story got a lot more believable."

"And what did Junya say?"

"That he didn't remember. He'd worn himself out studying and dozed off."

At that point, Seiji couldn't help interrupting. "Are you sure he didn't actually do it in his sleep?"

"But if someone isn't violent as a rule, they couldn't reflexively lash out at someone like that, could they?"

She had a point. That was probably why the people around him had started doubting him.

"So there was a time when even Satsuki wasn't happy, huh." Seiji's murmur came out sounding oddly heartfelt. Everyone had a history. No matter how well someone's life seemed to be going, there was hardship hidden in the shadows. However—

"I'm not so sure about that."

"Huh?"

Saori's lips were tensed in an ironic smile. She held out her smartphone again.

The screen showed Satsuki in a wedding dress. She was nestled close to the white-suited groom, a clean-cut, good-looking guy who was slender yet still muscular.

Aha. So this was Ryousuke Otose.

"She said they met while Junya was abusing her. He was the rising star of a major design firm and made ten million yen a year. Last year, he won a prize for newcomers that's considered the gateway to success for young designers."

"Yeah, actually, that doesn't sound like she'd be unhappy."

To put it rather crudely, she'd traded up.

"To Satsuki, I suspect Junya was a convenient stepping stone." Saori's voice was cynical, and her words were prickly around the edges.

Seiji found himself wondering if she was the one behind the nasty emails, although he didn't have a concrete reason why. He glanced at his employer, but Shiroshi was gazing steadily at the smartphone. "Would you mind if I looked at some more photographs?"

“That’s fine. They’re all in the same folder, so don’t mess with anything else, please.” Saori shrugged lightly, and Shiroshi took the smartphone from her.

Seiji leaned in from the side, peeking at the screen. “Huh?”

“Did something catch your attention?”

Seiji’s eyes had stopped on a photo taken at the campground’s washing-up area. Junya was standing off to the side, holding a lathered-up sponge. “So even good-looking guys wash dishes.”

“Hmm? What do you mean by that?”

During his college days, just once, Seiji had been invited to a barbecue. For some reason, the role of dishwasher had been dumped on him even before the meat was done grilling, and at some point while he was dutifully doing his best raccoon impression washing dishes, the party had broken up without him.

He suspected part of the reason was that he hadn’t been able to afford the meat everyone was supposed to bring and had tried to fudge it by showing up with packets of “Big Cutlet,” which, despite the name, contained fish instead of meat.

“Heh-heh. Really, you drifted off far too long that time, even for you.”

“But you *do* space out when you’re washing up, you know? That’s why you end up dropping and breaking dishes.”

“Seiji, if you spaced out any more than you already do, I suspect you might stop breathing.”

Okay, that was mean.

He was about to protest when he noticed Saori’s gaze had cooled to subzero temperatures. In cold like that, he could probably have hammered in a nail with a banana.

Hastily, he shifted his focus back to the smartphone. “Oh, actually, he’s not washing dishes in that photo, is he? He’s writing something down with his left hand.”

It seemed like Junya had gotten a call in the middle of cleaning up.

With a soapy sponge in his right hand and a smartphone wedged between his shoulder and his ear, Junya was desperately taking notes. It wasn’t as if Seiji had any right to talk, but the guy seemed like kind of a klutz.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Shiroshi asked, looking suddenly serious.

Taken aback, Seiji blinked. “Huh? Um, he’s not washing dishes; he’s taking notes with his left hand…”

“Ah yes. I understand.” Shiroshi nodded as if something had clicked into place for him. His mood was better than Seiji had ever seen it. “You do notice some uncommon things, Seiji.”

“Huh? I do?”

“Yes, you’re amazingly off-kilter.”

…Why did that not feel like a compliment?

“Did you find something in the photo?” Saori had leaned over to look at the screen; she didn’t seem to get it, either.

“Just a minor detail that caught my attention. Do you suppose you could email that photograph to me?”

“I don’t mind, but don’t use it for anything weird.”

“Thank you very much. Oh, send it to this smartphone, if you would.” The phone Shiroshi held out was Seiji’s; it had been sitting on the table.

…Apparently he was a *What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is also mine* kind of guy.

“And what became of Junya after that?”

“The seminar got too uncomfortable for him to keep going to, so he quit. From what I heard, he eventually ended up moving back home.”

“My, my. Then he’s still living there?”

“No idea. Rumor has it that he’s depressed and doesn’t leave the house anymore. He’s really come down in the world.”

“That’s on him, though, don’t you think? It wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t been an abusive partner.” Without meaning to, Seiji had found himself speaking more and more emphatically. No matter what kind of misfortune had found Junya, it was just the punch he’d thrown coming back to deck him, wasn’t it?

“Do you really believe so?”

“Huh?”

Saori seemed to be insinuating something. Her cheeks spasmed, twisting. She’d been smiling.

Leaning farther over the table, she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“You see, Satsuki’s got a little quirk— She’s had it for ages. She hasn’t noticed, but whenever she tells a lie or covers something up, she blinks harder. Like this.” She demonstrated, blinking dramatically.

“Oh!”

He recognized that gesture.

He’d seen it yesterday, when Satsuki had been talking with Shiroshi about the malicious emails.

“Let me ask once more: You really have no idea who the sender might be?”

“No, I don’t.”

When Satsuki had said that, she’d blinked so hard it had looked unnatural.

“When she turned up at my apartment after Junya hit her, and when she was crying and talking to the seminar professor about the abuse, she blinked like that the whole time.”

Seiji was speechless. Did that mean that she’d been lying when she claimed she’d been abused? “And you didn’t tell anyone about it?” The question came out sounding more like an accusation than he’d meant it to.

Saori shrugged evasively. “It’s not as if I had proof. Satsuki’s cheek *was* actually swollen, and she’d gotten a medical certificate to attest to the damage. People would have criticized me for questioning my friend, no doubt about it.”

“But if you knew she was lying…”

“This is Satsuki we’re talking about. If I’d accused her of lying, she might have made up an even bigger lie. Like, she could’ve told everyone that Junya had been cheating on her with me, and I’d secretly incited him to get abusive toward her.”

The more vulgar the rumor, the truer it seemed to people. Considering that, the lie he’d just heard seemed like a perfect fit for the truth.

“Heh-heh.” A little laugh escaped Saori’s lips. “We actually had a college reunion four months ago. I was the organizer, and wouldn’t you know it, I accidentally sent an invitation to Junya’s parents’ house.”

“Huh?”

“If that invitation had found its way to Junya, he might have managed to ambush Satsuki outside the venue. Something serious may have happened. She’d been updating her blog every other day, but she switched to every three days right about then.”

“But… No way!”

Right at that moment, something came back to Seiji in a rush.

Looking forward to seeing you at the reunion tomorrow. Let's all sing the school song. It's been too long since I really drank, so let's go wild!

At first glance, that comment had seemed to have been a note to a close friend. However, if she'd written it to subtly broadcast the fact that Satsuki was planning to attend the reunion…

"Aren't you her friend?" Seiji asked, suddenly feeling very cold.

Saori shrugged. "I'd been thinking it was about time we went our separate ways," she said, with a simplicity that was hard to believe. Then she gave a small, self-deprecating smile. "Ever since I started this job, she's been keeping her distance. What Satsuki needs is a sensible big-sister type who'll act as her foil, not a creepy loser who earns a living from ghost stories. That's why I decided to stop being her friend," she told them flatly.

Pulling her tote bag over her shoulder, she rose to her feet. Turning to Shiroshi, she gave him a smile that had a hint of defiance to it. "Just you wait. That girl's going to end up unhappy. It's bound to happen, and it's going to be soon."

"You will, too," Shiroshi said quietly. His voice was like a single droplet of ink falling onto a blank sheet of paper. "Be careful. As they say, 'You dig two graves when you curse someone.'"

Saori seemed to bite her lip hard, but she said nothing.

The heels of her low pumps clicked across the ground as she disappeared into the distance. Then all that was left was her nearly untouched cup of tea.

"Um…"

What should he say—and how? As Seiji floundered, utterly at a loss, Shiroshi smiled suddenly.

"Now then, we should be on our way."

"Huh? We're going home already?"

"Not quite. There's still time left in the day, so I believe I'll stop by the Suicide Bathroom we read about in the blog yesterday. Would you care to join me, Seiji?"

"Huh? No thanks."

"My, how cold of you." Shiroshi chuckled. It sounded a bit like the way a cat purred when it was stalking its prey, and for some reason, it sent a shiver down Seiji's spine.

“Either way, make sure you’re home before twilight. We’re expecting a guest.”

*

Oh, why me, why me?

Catching herself just before the murmur slipped out, Satsuki bit her lip.

Lately—or for the past four months, actually—she’d been in low spirits. She had to update her blog before the end of the day, but even booting up her computer seemed like too much work.

It was all because of Ryousuke, her husband.

“What brand would be best for the bassinet?”

For an expecting couple, it should have been a perfectly harmless subject.

However, Ryousuke had answered in an exasperated sigh: “I’m tired. Can’t this wait?” When Satsuki had opened the catalog anyway, he told her, “Just get whichever one you want,” a defeated look across his face.

“You do understand that you’re going to be a father, don’t you?”

She hadn’t meant to, but she’d found herself reproaching him.

However, his response had made her doubt what she was hearing.

“Going to be a what again? Of course I don’t.”

In that moment, her beloved husband had looked like an unfamiliar monster to her.

That had been late last night.

Now Satsuki was alone in their three-bedroom condo. Her unease had been growing by the day, and it weighed heavily on her. For what felt like the millionth time, she sighed.

It really didn’t look as if she was going to be able to post that update. The version of her all those people saw online needed to be happier than anyone else, and yet…

“I need a distraction.”

If she recalled, a café had just opened in front of the station. If all went well, she might be able to write her blog post on that. After all, once the baby came, she wouldn’t be able to just step out for tea anymore.

I would really rather go with Ryousuke, though.

Shaking off the haze that blanketed her heart, she put extra effort into getting ready. Selecting a brand-new cashmere dress and coat, she put on her favorite pair of pumps. Her lipstick was also a new color, just purchased.

When she left through the building's front entrance, a shockingly red evening sun had dyed the sky in ominous shades, and an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu swept over her. The sunset seemed to be burning down the sky from the horizon. Hadn't it been just like this when she'd wandered into that odd mansion?

"Huh?"

The next thing she knew, she'd lost her way again.

Up ahead was a tunnel overgrown with Japanese ivy, still green even in the dead of winter. If she kept going this way, she'd reach that European-style house and its peculiar residents.

No. I don't want this.

She almost turned to go back on reflex, but she stopped herself.

Even if she tried to retrace her steps, she didn't know how she'd gotten here. Once night fell, it was bound to get colder. She wanted to avoid getting too bad a chill, for her sake and her child's. Paying a second visit to that house might be her only option…even if it meant seeing that boy again.

"Welcome. I've been expecting you."

A voice that sounded a little like birdsong invited Satsuki into the study.

Languid sunset light tinted the whole room crimson. The boy's white kimono had looked like a burial robe already, but now it even looked dyed with blood.

Naturally, she hadn't come here on anyone's invitation, but the moment Satsuki heard the boy speak, she felt certain she'd been summoned.

"Please, make yourself comfortable," he said brightly, and in the blink of an eye, teacups appeared in front of them. Feeling as if she were acting out a script, Satsuki took a seat in one of the chairs.

The boy's assistant sat in the remaining chair.

Although his facial features weren't bad at all, the young man's hair looked like he'd just rolled out of bed. That and his

vague eyes dragged his first impression down to the level of "comedian." He looked like someone who would take the hard route through life; it reminded Satsuki of her former lover.

"By the way, I've discovered who sent those malicious emails." The unexpected voice was almost insolently cheerful.

Immediately, Satsuki's temper flared. She stood up. "That's enough! That matter is over and done wi—"

"Junya Sakuma. Your ex-fiancé."

A piece of paper slid across the tablecloth to her: a copy of a newspaper article, dated four months ago.

A corpse was found hanging by the neck in an abandoned house in the city. It was reported to the police by a man and woman who'd entered the site as a test of courage. The corpse belonged to a man between twenty and thirty years of age, and death seemed to have occurred several days previously. No suicide note was found. Police are working to identify the individual and his exact cause of death, as well as to determine any motives.

"This corpse belonged to Junya," the boy said impassively.

Satsuki just stood there frozen, speechless. How on earth had he identified him?

"Junya suffered from depression after dropping out of college, so he retreated to his parents' house and seldom left. A few months ago, his parents forced him to leave their home, and overcome with negative thoughts about his future, he hanged himself."

"It's his own fault. What he'd done came back to haunt him. That's all."

"Do you really think so?" the boy pressed.

Satsuki blinked in an exaggerated way. "Yes, I do."

She couldn't hide the quiver in her voice. Trying to calm herself down, she picked up her teacup. The tea had been brewed so strong that it was almost the color of blood.

She probably shouldn't drink it; the caffeine might harm the fetus. However, right now, she was desperate to divert her attention from the boy, even though she still needed to question him closely to find out exactly what and how much he knew about her.

Huh?

Something was reflected in the liquid's surface: An old woman hanging by the neck above Satsuki, gazing down at her with hollow eyes. As soon as she saw it, Satsuki screamed and sprang to her feet.

Ka-thunk.

She'd dropped her teacup, and a red stain spread over the carpet like blood.

"Wh-what was that?!"

"My, whatever's the matter? You look as if you've seen a ghost."

I need to get out of here, Satsuki thought. She had to run from this boy, right now. Her first mistake had been thinking she'd be able to leave this house without something happening to her.

"Oh, before you go, take a look at this photograph if you would." The boy held out a smartphone.

For some inexplicable reason, she found herself looking at a photo filled with memories for her.

It had been taken during a seminar camping trip. They were cleaning up after a barbecue, and Junya was taking notes, his smartphone wedged between his shoulder and his ear, a soapy sponge in one hand. From what she remembered, the call had been from his part-time job. All he'd had to do was say he'd call them back, and yet… That awkwardness of his had been charming, and she remembered not being able to resist teasing him about it.

"What about this photo?"

"His left hand."

"What?"

"Junya's hand. If you look closely, you'll see that he's holding the pen in his left hand."

Hastily, she took another look at the photo.

He's right.

The soapy sponge was in his right hand. His other hand was the one with the ballpoint pen.

"He appears to have been extremely flustered. Would anyone instinctively take notes with their nondominant hand at a time like that? In other words, Junya's dominant hand was originally his left."

"It can't be. That's not possible! He always used his right hand in class and during chores."

“He must have been trained to do so when he was young. Because he behaved as if he were right-handed for all intents and purposes, no one around him picked up on it. His parents’ ‘unfair discipline’ may have been a prejudiced attempt to correct his left-handedness.”

Junya had said that his parents had hit him without mercy in the name of “discipline.” Could that really have been to train him to stop using his left hand?

“When I heard about the mirror writing, something tugged at the back of my mind. Characters that are flipped horizontally are easier for left-handed people to write. As a result, many of them pick up mirror writing naturally at a young age. Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, is said to have been able to write backward because he was born left-handed.” At that point, the boy held up his index finger. “And that leaves us with a problem: When a left-handed person strikes someone who’s facing them, the other person’s right cheek is the one that’s hit. However, when Junya struck you, it was your left cheek that was swollen, correct?”

“…What are you trying to say?”

“In short, that you staged the assault. You slipped the silver ring off Junya’s hand while he was sleeping, put it on your own finger, and hit yourself in the face. Mixing an over-the-counter medication from the drug store into his drink would have been enough to ensure that he fell asleep.”

“Th-that’s a lie! I’ll sue you for defamation!” The intensity of her shout was like a slap across the face, but there was an edge of hysteria to her voice.

Still smiling, the boy raised his white porcelain cup to his lips. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m trying to save you from misfortune.”

“You better not be joking! What exactly do you know about me?!”

“As a matter of fact, I had Beniko—the young woman who showed you in—research your family today. You lost your mother when you were in middle school, didn’t you? She hung herself, just as Junya did.”

“So? What about it?” There was a note of sharp disgust in her voice.

“According to the neighbors, your mother had a tendency to sigh and complain. She compared her fortune to others at every

turn, envying, resenting, lamenting the people around her. She was unhappy right up to the moment of her death."

"Yes, my mother and I are polar opposites." She could feel her lips curve ironically.

The boy shook his head quietly. "No. You're just like her."

"What?"

"For both of you, your happiness is based far too heavily on others. You can't define 'happiness' on your own terms. For that reason, you are more unhappy than anyone."

It's not true. Satsuki shook her head.

A happy marriage, life as a happy couple… In order to have it all, she'd worked twice as hard as anyone else. She'd practically coughed up blood to get this far.

Just a little further. I'm almost there.

She was already carrying her long-awaited first child in her womb. Once she had this baby, she'd have everything the world envied. This time, she was *sure* she'd find happiness.

"You see? The fact that you keep pursuing happiness is proof that you aren't happy." The boy chuckled deep in his throat. Then, with the eyes of a cat toying with a mouse, he told her, "Due punishment awaits those who sin. That is the law of karma. However, as children can't choose their parents, there is room for sympathy in your case. If you wish to escape Hell's punishment, go to someone and confess your sin. If you don't, you'll fall into a living hell."

Satsuki didn't even have to think about it.

Immediately, she stood up, speaking as if she were wringing the words from her throat.

"I'd rather die!"

A moment later, her vision seemed to dim.

The sun had just burned out; night had fallen. It was as if the only candle in a dark room had been extinguished.

The boy's face turned toward Satsuki. Even in the gloom, it was far too pale.

"Then to Hell you must go."

A mocking smile curled the boy's lips.

"What?" she asked, but his hands came together sharply, and then—

"Huh?"

The next thing she knew, she was standing on a street she recognized: a narrow lane about ten minutes' walk from her apartment. She must have started home without realizing. She couldn't remember leaving that house, though.

Could it all have been a dream? That European mansion towering beyond the green tunnel, the boy in his white kimono that reminded her of a burial robe… Maybe it had all been a nightmare.

Yet unease clung to her heart like a black mist. It felt as if something irrevocable might happen at that very moment.

"Oh, why me, why me?"

Catching herself muttering the words, she bit her lip.

Oh, why me, why me…

It was what Satsuki's mother had always said. The woman had been one big ball of grumbles, complaints, and grievances. No matter what she happened to be doing, out of nowhere she'd start muttering, "Why me, why me?" If she heard that the neighbors had taken a trip to Europe or a relative had remodeled their kitchen, she'd say, "And look at us…," and give a deep, dramatic sigh.

"Oh, why me, why me? Why am I so unhappy?"

When Satsuki was in fifth grade, she'd bought her mother an apron for Mother's Day in an attempt to make her happy. It had cost a whole ten thousand yen. Putting all the New Year's money she'd managed to save up into her wallet, she'd gone to a faraway department store to buy it, transferring between several different buses to get there.

She'd thought her mother would be glad.

She'd hoped her mother would smile for her.

She was supposed to laugh and tell Satsuki how happy she was.

But…

"For goodness' sake, an apron? What, are you telling me to work even harder around the house?" Her mother let out a deep, dramatic sigh. "Oh, why me? The woman next door got a bouquet of carnations."

When Satsuki heard that, she felt something in her heart explode. "I'd be better off if you were dead, Mom!"

From that day on, as far as Satsuki was concerned, she didn't have a mother.

When she told her father she wanted to go to cram school, he readily gave her money for classes and meals. He'd stayed away from home as much as possible for a long time and probably felt guilty about leaving his daughter by herself with a mother like that.

A lot of Satsuki's friends went to the same cram school, so she never felt lonely. She'd stay at diners until ten at night, and in the mornings, she'd leave the house without a glance at the breakfast that had been set out on the table. Day after day, after day.

When she did come home, Satsuki and her mother didn't even greet each other anymore. The only things in the house were her mother's repetitive "Oh, why me, why me?" and Satsuki's silence, colder than ice.

Now that she thought about it, that was when her mother had started to go strange. Before long, the entire neighborhood was avoiding her, and even her relatives didn't want anything to do with her. She just sat there all day long, staring at the TV with hollow eyes.

One morning, Satsuki was about to walk straight through the kitchen as usual when her mother's mumbled voice stopped her in her tracks.

"Oh, why me, why me? Why am I all alone?" the woman murmured, her eyes still on the TV.

The next instant, words tumbled from Satsuki's lips.

"If you don't like it, why don't you die?"

It was what Satsuki had always wanted to say to her.

If she hated it so much, she should just die already.

Her mother's head swiveled toward her, and the sight of her face made Satsuki gulp. She hadn't really looked at her mother in a long time, and the woman was just skin and bones. It was as if she hadn't eaten for days.

"Will you hang yourself with me, then?"

Ignoring the question, Satsuki ran out of the house.

When she got home after cram school that day, her mother was standing in the dark kitchen in a daze. Or at least Satsuki thought she was standing— As soon as she turned the lights on, she realized her mother was hanging from the ceiling by a rope.

Dishes covered with plastic wrap sat on the table, and a supermarket flyer lay on top of them. There was a message for Satsuki scrawled on it:

Someday you'll end up like this, too.

Even before she called an ambulance, Satsuki tore up the flyer and threw it away.

She didn't really want to make the call. She wanted to ignore the corpse and run out of the house. If the woman hadn't been dead already, she would have strangled her personally.

Two years later…

When Satsuki told Junya about her mother's death, he'd nodded, looking vaguely troubled. "I think I get why you'd be so scared."

"Scared? You're sure you don't mean 'mad' or 'full of hate'?"

"All those things are probably true. I'm mad, too, and I hate my parents, and I'm scared. It feels like if I don't shut the fact that they exist out of my mind, I'll end up like them someday."

Junya hadn't been blessed with good parents, either.

He had a burn scar on his back from when he was little. He'd said his father had gotten angry with him for being "naughty" and had held a hot iron up against his skin.

"Still, once I manage to forget my parents entirely, you'll be the first family I've ever had, Satsuki." The carefree smile Junya had given her then made him look very young.

Stupid, trusting Junya.

She'd thought they'd manage to find happiness together, but then…

"Actually, I think I want to turn down that job offer and go to grad school instead," Junya had told her, a serious look on his face. It was the spring of their last year in college.

It was pretty common for outstanding seminar students to let their advising professors talk them into going to graduate school. However, it felt like Junya saw his father in the middle-aged professor and seemed to be intoxicated by the fact that the man needed him.

"I know we promised to get married, but do you think you could wait a little longer?"

Satsuki couldn't refuse. "All right. I'll be cheering you on."

"Thanks, Satsuki. That's what I thought you'd say."

Oh, why me, why me?

She thought she heard her mother murmuring away somewhere. It was almost as if she were whispering, *If this keeps going, you're going to end up unhappy*.

And then…

“Listen, Satsuki? Would you be interested if I set you up with someone?”

Not long afterward, her teacher at the popular cooking school she was attending made her a very attractive offer.

“I have a nephew who works for a major design agency, and I thought I could introduce you two, if you didn’t mind. See, here’s a picture.”

In the photo she held out, Ryousuke, the man who would become Satsuki’s husband, wore a brilliant smile. He seemed full of confidence that he’d live his whole life on the winning team and that unhappiness would forever be a foreign concept to him.

“I know I’m a doting aunt, but he’s pretty handsome, isn’t he? His salary’s not bad, either. He’s still young, but he’s been made art director, and he’s worked on the design for a famous advertisement. I’m sure you’ve seen it; they’ve made TV commercials of it lately, too.”

The jingle her teacher hummed belonged to a major corporation that even Satsuki had heard of. She also knew that this woman—who was a popular culinary scientist as well as a cooking school teacher—came from a wealthy, distinguished family. By extension, this nephew of hers probably did as well.

“Goodness, I’m sorry. I forgot to ask you the most important question: Are you seeing anyone right now, Satsuki?”

“No. I’m not.”

She didn’t regret that answer.

However, if she broke up with Junya now, people would get the wrong idea. They’d think she was a fickle woman blinded by the other man’s job title and income. They’d sympathize with poor, abandoned Junya, and it would damage her reputation. Ryousuke, her new fiancé, might even end up hearing about it.

And so…

Framing Junya for domestic violence had been her only option, really.

Sure enough, even when Junya knew Satsuki had betrayed him, he’d never blamed her for it. Not only that, but as she’d attracted people’s mistrust with her insistent claims of abuse that had never happened, Junya himself kept defending her, all alone.

“Satsuki’s not like that,” he’d said. “There has to be some sort of reason.”

Even though there wasn’t. Of course there wasn’t.

After all, Satsuki’s motive for getting close to Junya in the first place had been sheer self-interest. She’d opened up to him about her mother’s death because she’d thought she could win his sympathy and compassion that way.

His looks and future potential made him a boyfriend that any woman would envy, and he’d been the only person she’d met with both of those traits… Up until now, that is.

Stupid, trusting, poor Junya.

As the people around them grew more and more suspicious, Junya had repeatedly visited Satsuki’s apartment and tried to talk things out.

So Satsuki had let him have it:

“The thing is, I never actually wanted to be your family.”

She knew just what to say to shatter him.

And…

“If you hate having parents like that so much, you should just hang yourself.”

That remark of hers had definitely brought Junya sorrow and misfortune.

He’d quit the seminar without ever seeing Satsuki again. She’d heard rumors that he was back at his parents’ house and had practically dropped out of society.

She assumed she’d never see him again, but…

“Hey, want to hang yourself with me?”

Four months ago.

As she was walking home from her college reunion, Junya had appeared in front of her and revealed himself as the sender of those nasty emails. She barely recognized him. The shoulders of his dingy jacket were speckled with flakes of dandruff, and there were horrible dark circles under his eyes that peeked through long, unkempt hair.

He was the picture of misfortune.

At that very thought, irritation and loathing welled up inside Satsuki, and she turned her back on Junya without saying a word. Just like her mother on the day she’d hanged herself, he didn’t even seem worth speaking to.

Then, all of a sudden, a stabbing pain ran through her neck. As she was blacking out, she realized he’d used a stun gun on

her, after which he carried her unconscious body to an abandoned building. When she woke up, his corpse was hanging right in front of her. She screamed, dashed out of the building, and ran back home to her apartment— And that had been the end of it.

Junya hadn't left a suicide note. The public accepted that he was a former elite who'd failed at life and killed himself, and he was forgotten without even getting a proper funeral. No one knew about Satsuki's sin, about the abuse she'd fabricated.

Everything was over. There was nothing left to threaten her now. Or there shouldn't have been…

I had no idea I was pregnant at the time.

As her belly grew rounder by the day, Satsuki's unease grew more insistent.

What if Junya had assaulted her while she was unconscious?

He'd carried her off and planned to die with her, but at the last moment, he'd decided not to kill her. Had he been betting on the possibility that she'd conceived his child?

Would the baby growing inside her become the seed of some irreparable misfortune?

Oh, why me, why me?

Her husband's behavior increased her anxiety. Had he instinctively realized the baby wasn't his? Was that why he was being so cruel?

He couldn't have, and yet…

No matter how many times she told herself it wasn't true, Ryousuke really was avoiding her. His disgusted expression was exactly like the one her father had used with her mother.

Oh, why me, why me? Why am I all alone?

A voice rose in the back of her mind, and Satsuki shook her head firmly, driving it away.

I have to try harder, harder, harder.

She had to be happier than anyone else.

After all, if she ended up unhappy, she'd hang herself, just as her mother's last words had predicted.

Oh, I see.

She'd figured it out. The true form of the whisper that had possessed her was that scrap of paper, the one that said *Someday you'll end up like this, too.*

"Oh, Satsuki!"

A voice had abruptly called out to her, and Satsuki stopped so suddenly she almost pitched forward. Turning back, she saw her former teacher, the one who'd once introduced her to Ryousuke. Once Satsuki had married her nephew, the self-declared "doting aunt" had treated her with affection as well, taking her shopping or out to lunch whenever she had the opportunity.

Satsuki did feel lucky.

If cracks developed in their marriage, though, this woman would definitely side with her nephew. That was why Satsuki hadn't wanted to see her lately. Especially not right now.

"Perfect timing! I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by. You haven't let me see much of you lately, you know. I've been wondering how you were doing."

"I'm sorry. Ryousuke's job has kept him very busy lately."

"Oh, my dear, that's fine. They do say husbands are best when they're happy and out of the way, but running a household by yourself is an awful lot of work. Listen, why don't you come have dinner with me? There's a brand-new café in front of the station."

It's that same café, Satsuki thought.

Come to think of it, that was why she'd left the apartment in the first place. On top of that, she could feel her mood growing lighter the longer she spent with this energetic, generous woman.

That settles it: We'll go to the café together.

For the first time in a long while, she felt genuinely cheerful —and that's when it happened.

"I'm sorry, I can't. I promised I'd go hang myself."

Even Satsuki couldn't believe the words she'd blurted out.

What did I just say?

"Um, I'm sorry. I forgot I had something I needed to do. Excuse me."

Hastily bowing to her dumbfounded teacher, Satsuki fled.

Hang myself? …Me?

The idea seemed ridiculous, and yet an unsettling premonition was swelling inside her. She couldn't take any more anxiety and tension; it felt as if her nerves might snap with a *bang* at any moment.

She wanted to scream *Help me!* to anyone who'd listen.

She wanted to stamp her feet like a small child and wail *I'm so unhappy!*

She'd only ever been able to do things like that with Junya.

The apartment's no good; I'll be alone there. I have to go somewhere with people.

With no idea where to go, she kept walking at random. She got the feeling she was headed toward the park, but she felt oddly detached from the idea, as if this were happening to somebody else, when all of a sudden, a pair of legs swung down to dangle in front of her. They seemed to be blocking her way, telling her she'd reached the end of the line.

Come to think of it…

The memory of her mother's corpse rose to her mind. She'd been wearing that apron—the one Satsuki had given her as a child. The plastic-wrapped plates on the kitchen table had held dinner for two.

Maybe her mother had wasted away to skin and bones because she'd been waiting until she could eat with Satsuki again.

"Mom…"

She murmured the word almost involuntarily, and then—

Something that had been squirming restlessly inside her gathered heavily in her lower abdomen, bearing down, and then a hot, viscous mass flowed out between her legs.

Oh, it's been born…, Satsuki thought silently.

Then her mind shut off as if someone had flipped a switch.

⁂

Waaah, waaaaaah.

She heard crying, somewhere in the darkness.

Was that a small child?

No. A baby.

It was in pain, suffering, sad…lonely.

It seemed to be insisting that it *had* to cry.

It kept screaming *Help me, help me* to anyone who'd listen.

Just hear how miserable I am, it said.

Oh, I need to hurry.

I need to hold it close.

I need to make it shut up.

I need to stop it.
I can't let anybody else notice it.
Before anybody tells me, "You're unhappy."
I need to strangle it, fast.

Waaaah. Waaaah.

When Satsuki opened her eyes, she was on the cold, tiled floor of a public bathroom. Right beside her, an infant was wailing at the top of its lungs.

"Stop crying."

She crawled over to it and set a hand on its neck.

Immediately, its head warped as if it were made of clay, transforming into a terribly familiar face.

Mom?

She almost called out to her on reflex, but then she noticed…

Oh, no, it's not her. That face belongs to—

"If you don't like it, why don't you die?" the baby whispered, and then it leered at her with a truly disgusting expression. By the time Satsuki realized it was her own face, her hand was already clenched around the infant's throat.

There was a light *krikk* and a sensation as if she'd broken a twig in her hands.

How can it have been so easy?
I've always, always wanted to do that to myself.
I have to be happy.
Happier than anyone else.
After all, if I'm not, I won't be able to forgive myself.
And yet…

All of a sudden, she didn't know what she should do anymore.

Oh, what do I do?
Hurry, hurry. I need to be happy right this minute, but…
What did I have to do again?
Oh, that's right. I remember.
I need to hang myself.

Then Satsuki took the strap of her shoulder bag, hooked it onto the ventilation window, wrapped its end around her throat, and let herself drop.

……Krikk.

*

A few days later…

Seiji, who was still freeloading, got a text from Saori. Incredibly, Satsuki's hanged corpse had been found in that park restroom: the Suicide Bathroom. She'd hooked her purse strap over the ventilation window and hadn't left a note.

Do you know anything about this? If you think of something, anything at all, please tell me.

It was an extremely agitated message.

"Just you wait. That girl's going to end up unhappy. It's bound to happen, and it's going to be soon."

It had turned out just the way Saori had predicted, but all he could see in her words was confusion and regret.

When Seiji read the text to Shiroshi at three o'clock tea…

"I see. That's a pity," Shiroshi said. Then he took a sip of deep red tea. His expression was perfectly composed, almost as if he'd known this was going to happen.

"Um, doesn't that mean Satsuki hanged herself right after she left here?"

"Yes, she must have."

"Did her conscience start to bother her or something? She didn't seem like she was planning on killing herself."

"Well, sometimes people hang themselves even when they don't really want to."

"…You're kidding, right?"

"Maybe, maybe not."

Young Shiroshi chuckled. As usual, it was a pretty cryptic response. *Never mind that…* Seiji's eyes went to the second text. This one made even less sense to him.

"Saori said when they examined Satsuki's body, they didn't find a baby."

After Seiji had heard about the suicide, his first reaction was to ask about the baby. It had almost certainly died, but maybe there had been some miraculous, one-in-a-million chance it had survived.

However, Saori's response had been completely unexpected:

She couldn't have been pregnant. Satsuki was on her period when she killed herself.

Ridiculous. How was that even possible?

The question made Shiroshi chuckle a little. “I see. I guess that makes you a fool, Seiji.”

“A f—”

Struck by a surprise uppercut, Seiji froze, speechless. Why was he getting insulted at a time like this?

Ignoring Seiji’s “living statue” impression, Shiroshi calmly poured himself a second cup of tea, smiling slightly as if he was savoring its fragrance. “Didn’t you think it odd? I just assumed you’d picked up on it as well.”

“P-picked up on what?”

“Satsuki was never actually pregnant.”

“Huh?” He caught himself reacting like a pigeon who’d been shot with a popgun.

“It was a delusion. Perhaps one could call it a type of false pregnancy. Think back: During her first visit to this house, she claimed to be on her way to the obstetrician. However, she was wearing *slim-heeled pumps*.”

“Oh—”

So that was it: When he’d felt something was off that time, what he’d noticed was her feet.

“Besides, there are no obstetrics clinics near here. The only thing like it in the neighborhood is a psychotherapy practice.”

“Then she was…”

“Yes, I would imagine she was seeing a counselor for her delusional pregnancy.”

But her symptoms hadn’t improved. Her husband hadn’t known what to do with her, and when he’d gradually begun to avoid coming home, the loneliness had made her symptoms worse. This had probably been the real source of her anxiety.

“It isn’t possible to hound someone to suicide and then go on as if it never happened. Guilt, regret, remorse, anxiety, the fear of discovery… These feelings became a distortion that came to dwell in her.”

“Then that’s why Satsuki died,” Seiji murmured, feeling somewhat relieved.

If Satsuki’s conscience was what had driven her to suicide, then the fact that she’d talked with Shiroshi in the mansion here right before it happened was just a coincidence.

But—

“Well, it’s probably time I told you, Seiji.”

Setting his teacup down with a soft *clink*, Shiroshi smiled gently.

For some reason, that smile seemed suddenly ominous, and Seiji involuntarily scooted his chair back. It gave a brief, sharp creak that sounded a little like a scream.

“Let’s review. The most prominent characteristic of the yokai *aobouzu* is the way he questions a person. He leaves the choice of whether to accept or refuse to the listener. If you ignore him, he’ll hang you, but if you make it clear that you refuse, in most cases he’ll vanish without doing anything.”

“H-huh. Is that right?”

“On that point, the *itsuki* is far more fearsome.”

“…Itsuki?”

It turned out to come from a story told long ago in Edo, before it became Tokyo.

Arriving late to a feast, one of the guests told the gathering, “Something urgent has come up, so I just stopped in to say I can’t come,” and tried to leave immediately. Since he was acting strange, they pressed him for an explanation, to which he replied, “I promised I’d hang myself at the Kuichigai Gate.” They forced some sake on him and kept the man there for a while. Before long, a report came in that someone had hanged themselves at the Kuichigai Gate, and so the guest escaped with his life.

“In short, an *itsuki* is a type of malevolent spirit that possesses a victim. Spirits that take control of someone and stir up their dangerous impulses are generally called phantom killers. An *itsuki* is the vengeful ghost of a person who has committed suicide by hanging; they take possession of random strangers and force them to hang themselves so that the possessed person’s soul will take their place in Hell and release the *itsuki* from their suffering. Once an *itsuki* takes hold of you, there is no way to refuse them.”

“Um, I can’t tell where you’re going with this,” Seiji broke in impatiently.

Shiroshi smiled at him. “Do you remember the story about the Suicide Bathroom?”

“The one on Saori’s blog, right? There’s a public restroom in the park where people keep—”

Just as he was about to say *hanging themselves*, he saw it.

The circular, red surface of the teacup in Shiroshi's hand showed the reflection of an old woman with wild, unkempt hair hanging from her neck. Seiji started to his feet with a clatter. "Wh-wh-wha—?!"

"Oh, you finally noticed? What you just saw now is an *itsuki*," Shiroshi explained, sounding completely unconcerned. All Seiji could do was stare at him, petrified. "As it happens, the Suicide Bathroom was her doing. The reason no suicide notes have ever been found is because the people who hanged themselves there never meant to do it."

"Wha…? Huh?"

"On the way back from our meeting with Saori the other day, I stopped by that bathroom. As I'd anticipated, the *itsuki* was there, so I brought her back to the house with me and had her possess Satsuki." The tone of his voice was as bright and melodic as ever; he might as well have been talking about the weather.

"Wh-why…?" Seiji gasped.

"As punishment for her sin. That is why I sent her to Hell," Shiroshi said simply.

Seiji wanted to tell him that was ridiculous, but the *itsuki* was right there, hanging from the ceiling. Even so, a primitive fear that was stronger than reason or common sense refused to accept what he was seeing as real.

What in the world was this boy?

"By the way, Seiji, did you know that *oni*, demons from Hell, sometimes appear in the human world?"

"N-no…"

"Originally, these *oni* weren't confined to the underworld but could travel to this world as well. They would load the wicked into a blazing carriage and send them to Great King Enma while they were still alive. At present, however, that aspect of their role is being neglected. The number of *oni* responsible for tormenting souls is limited, and the ranks of the dead keep growing. And so…" Shiroshi held up one finger. "As a countermeasure, Great King Enma decided to have others take over a portion of the work. In modern terms, we would call this 'outsourcing.' And as one of the branch offices, this mansion has a certain charm cast over it."

He chuckled, his face an even paler white than a Noh *hannya* mask.

“At twilight, those who harbor secret sins are drawn to this house, unawares. All of them have evaded the law; they may even have managed to hide their crime itself. Here they find me, and it is my job to expose their sins and send them to Hell.”

A memory came back to Seiji.

The day he’d first set foot in this house, when he’d asked about the job, what Shiroshi had said was—

“Th-then you… You’re not telling me your proxy service is—”

“Yes. It’s a proxy service *for Hell*.” Shiroshi’s voice was flat and firm.

It sounded like a bad joke…but someone had actually died.

“When there are grounds for sympathy, as there were in Satsuki’s case, I make a point of giving the individual an opportunity to atone before handing down my decision. Unfortunately,” he added with a trace of sadness, “they almost never take it.”

“H-how many people have you—?”

“Twenty-two in all. Or rather, twenty-three now, including Satsuki. The ultimate goal is to send one hundred people to Hell, so there’s still a lot of work to be done.”

His wry smile held a rare hint of self-mockery.

“Now then, Seiji, are you familiar with the occult tale *Ino Mononoke Roku*?”

“N-no.”

“My, my. It’s quite famous, you know. It recounts the strange events experienced by a young sixteen-year-old boy known as Heitarou—a feudal retainer of the domain of Miyoshi, who would later go on to call himself Budayu. Due to the absurd nature of the story, there’s a tendency to assume it is fabricated; however, as a matter of fact, the historical existence of every character who appears in it has been confirmed.”

Heitarou had antagonized the yokai by performing a “trial of courage” on Mount Higuma, and for the next thirty days, he was subjected to attacks from all sorts of monsters. In the end, an individual named Sanmoto Gorouzaemon appeared and introduced himself as the Demon King. Complimenting Heitarou on his courage, the Demon King gave him a wooden mallet as a reward, then left with his retinue of yokai…

“You see, Sanmoto Gorouzaemon is my father. Normally, I use my mother’s last name to conceal my parentage.”

“But no— Then, what? You’re the boss of the yokai?!”

“The boss’s son and heir, yes,” Shiroshi declared with a smile. Although there was nothing in that smile but quiet grace, it both sent chills up Seiji’s spine and gave him heart palpitations.

“More accurately, he’s only *one* of the figures regarded as the leader. His title may be Demon King, but he can’t really throw his weight around while he’s in equal competition with a rival, so he’s currently doing everything he can to secure the title for himself.” Shiroshi’s smile developed a wry edge, then he looked Seiji full in the face.

“On that note, Seiji, I have a request for you. If possible, I would like to keep you on as my assistant.”

“A-and what if I refuse?”

“You won’t. That I know for a fact.”

Shiroshi laughed as if he’d seen right through Seiji.

His lips were curved in a crescent-moon smile, and though they were as finely molded as a doll’s, they seemed to echo that same *hannya* mask as before. No matter how beautiful he might appear on the outside, peeling back one layer of skin would reveal the blood-slicked face of a smiling *oni*.

Seiji wanted to run.

Even as he thought this, the soles of his feet clung to the floor, refusing to budge. It felt like a nightmare. He knew he was dreaming, but he couldn’t wake up.

He only had one option.

An old sailor’s saying goes “Hell is right below the floorboards,” and Seiji truly felt as if a gaping hole had opened up beneath him. The pit there held untold depths of emptiness and despair, as dark as the pupils of the boy’s eyes.

In short, if he didn’t want to go through literal Hell, his only option was to stay with this boy, the king of the demons, and work as his assistant.

But tormenting the dead alongside one of Hell’s demons, watching sinners writhe in agony while he lived in fear of the judgment that would inevitably fall on him as well— Wouldn’t that be a living hell anyway?

“What if, someday, I commit some sort of sin?”

The question was out before he knew he was going to ask it.

Shiroshi cocked his head, looking a little surprised. Then he gave Seiji a smile that reminded him of a white peony blooming out of season and said:

“If you do, a thousand evils will be waiting for you.”

Right at that moment, Seiji felt like he finally understood what the peonies on the boy's kimono represented.

Not "flowers"— He's the king of a thousand horrors.

Mystery 1 – The End

Mystery 2

Nue

Seiji was lost again.

How many times did this make? He'd gone down street after street and turned several corners, but it didn't seem to matter how far he walked. He never saw anyone else, and all the houses he passed were silent.

Twilight was sometimes called the "hour of demons." The "hour of disasters." Under the madder-red sky, the whole world looked like shadow theater in red and black.

He'd been living at the house for two months now but still didn't know how to get back there. That said, once he got lost like this, he felt sure he'd stumble onto it again.

Even after he'd learned that Shiroshi was actually the boss of the demons—or rather, their boss's son and heir—his days had been peaceful. Humans are inherently self-interested creatures, so although Seiji had spent a while shivering with the covers pulled over his head, when he got to the breakfast table the next morning, he felt as if it might all have been a bad dream. And—the final nail in the coffin—when pastries were served at three o'clock tea, his instinctive fear didn't stand a chance in a battle against appetite.

The mansion was a strangely comfortable place to live. Was this how frogs felt when they were gradually being boiled to death?

Still—

The thought that that comfort was contingent on his usefulness as an assistant sent a tiny chill down his spine.

Shiroshi had basically solved the previous incident on his own. Seiji hadn't been much more than a big, awkward accessory, had he?

If he starts thinking I'm even less useful than that…

Seiji shivered at the idea that crossed his mind.

No, he wasn't going to think about that right now.

Fortunately, no guests had visited the house since that first time, which meant his "assistant" title had gone largely forgotten. He was a freeloader—or actually, maybe more like a pet. Although Shiroshi looked close to a decade younger than Seiji, he seemed to consider Seiji as being about as smart as the average dog or cat and was constantly taking care of him in a myriad of ways.

Seiji was an adult, even if he wasn't very good at it, and he would have loved to protest this treatment. However, when the boy said things to him like, "Could you run to the supermarket on an errand? Feel free to keep the change as pocket money," the way he had today, ready agreement was the only sane response.

And so, the days passed without incident.

"I'm baaack."

When he finally made it to the house, the enormous sacred anise tree had put out clusters of small buds. Still tightly closed, they seemed to be shivering in the chilly wind, waiting impatiently for spring.

"Shiroooshi, I bought what you… Huh?"

Opening the study door, he let out a noise of surprise. Shiroshi was seated at the table as usual, but someone he'd never seen before was sitting across from him.

"Welcome home. We have a guest."

"Um, you mean…?" Seiji asked timidly, taking a seat.

"Yes, most likely number twenty-four," Shiroshi said absently, taking the shopping bag from him. "One, two, three…" He counted the apples sitting inside the bag. "Yes, perfect. It must have been heavy; you did very well." He patted Seiji on the head in a "good boy" sort of way. Maybe he had mistaken the errand for a game of fetch.

"Excuse me, who is this?"

"Seiji Tohno. Think of him as something like my assistant."

He'd been casually demoted to *something like* Shiroshi's assistant.

"My name is Rinko Shidou. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," the guest greeted him. She looked the picture of a sheltered young lady from a good family.

The woman appeared to be about Seiji's age. Her black kimono was made of expensive *tsumugi* silk decorated with a

vine motif, and she wore it well. Her carefully combed black hair hung to her waist. She had the beauty of a traditional Kyoto doll, but there was a cold edge to the gaze she'd turned on Seiji. How should he put it…? *A look reserved for lower life-forms?*

"Ms. Shidou was just telling me that Kaori Iogi told her to come here."

"Um, who's that?" Seiji asked in a whisper.

Shiroshi lowered his voice likewise. "Someone connected to a previous case. She was the one who gave us this house."

"What?!"

"On the surface, she gave it as a gesture of gratitude, but it was hush money, plain and simple. The wealthier the family, the stronger their desire to cover up their relatives' disgrace."

Seiji couldn't believe it. Had they been living on hush money this whole time? He couldn't help but shudder.

Ignoring him, Shiroshi turned back to Rinko with a smile. "Then I take it you're also a student at St. Catherine's Academy for Girls."

"Yes, I'm in my third year at the university there. We're on spring break at the moment, so I came back home for a little while."

"University breaks do tend to be quite long, don't they?"

St. Catherine's Academy for Girls was a rarity these days: a school for the daughters of distinguished families. It had to be pretty famous if Seiji knew about it… Even if he'd only heard about it from a certain online bulletin board.

Incredibly, this young lady of impeccable standing wanted them to slay a monster.

"I would like you to rid us of a *nue*."

…Huh? A what?

"There is a Noh play about it, if you are familiar. The one by Zeami…"

"Ahhh… Noh's the one where they wear those funny masks, right?"

"Seiji."

Feeling as if he'd been ordered back to his kennel, Seiji snapped his mouth shut. Dumb dogs shouldn't bark.

"The *nue* is a monstrous bird that appears in *The Tale of the Heike*. It is also famous for having been shot down by Minamoto no Yorimasa, which Zeami took as the subject of his play, *Nue*."

“Indeed. My family appears to have been cursed by one.”

“Could you go into detail on that?”

Nodding, Rinko obliged. “It began four years ago…”

Her father, Kazeaki, had been the head of the Shidou family, and her brother Akihito, his right-hand man at the age of just twenty-four. That year, they had been involved in a collision on the expressway.

Her father had been riding in the back seat and died on impact. Her brother, the driver, had been seriously injured; the body of the car had crushed his entire left side. For a while they feared he might not survive, but he’d made a miraculous recovery. While he’d lost much of his hearing and still had some paralysis in his extremities, he could navigate ordinary situations without trouble.

However…

“The accident changed my brother into someone else entirely.”

Formerly a mild man, he’d become violent. Sudden attacks of rage robbed him of his control and sent him on rampages so wild that the people around him feared him, calling him a *crazed beast*.

“I see. Executive dysfunction following the accident?”

“Yes, that was the doctor’s diagnosis as well.”

They’d lost Seiji. Noticing his puzzled look, Shiroshi whispered in his ear: “It’s a kind of aftereffect from a brain injury. The patient may appear to have recovered, but damage to the brain has left them unable to curb their violent impulses and emotions.”

“Th-that’s really rough.”

It sounded like it drastically changed the personality of anyone suffering from it, which had to be hard on their families.

“However, after my father passed away, my brother became head of the family. We wanted him to settle down as soon as possible, so it was decided to bring a distant relation into our family as his wife.”

As Rinko spoke, she took a photo out of the handbag on her lap.

It seemed to have been taken at a traditional Shinto wedding ceremony. A woman was wearing a white trailing robe and bridal headdress. The bride’s face was tense, her skin pale, but

her face looked innocent and youthful. A carefree smile would have looked very good on her.

She was young, though. Way too young.

“This is Suzuha Shidou. Kurahashi, before she was married. She was sixteen when this photo was taken.”

“S-sixteen?!”

That was criminal. At that age, she might never even have fallen in love before.

“My sister-in-law was still young, and caring for my brother proved to be a heavier burden than we had anticipated. Gradually she grew more and more unstable until, two years ago, she thrust her face into a charcoal brazier and severely burned herself. After that didn’t kill her, she cut her throat with a pair of fabric shears.”

Horrific was the only word for it.

“It was a terrible death. Her eyes were clouded white, and her face was as black as coal. Even more bizarre, she’d been wearing a traditional haori coat over her shoulders.”

“Was it a garment she had a particular attachment to?”

“I couldn’t say. It was a present from my brother, who has a fondness for antiques. I’m told it was over one hundred years old. Normally, she kept it displayed on a kimono rack.”

“So Suzuha must have taken it off the rack and put it on before her suicide attempt.”

“No, after.”

“After?”

“In her deranged state, my sister-in-law pushed her face into the brazier, and my mother, who had been caring for her, went to call the doctor. It appears that Suzuha took the haori off the rack during the time my mother was out of the room. She put it on, took the shears from the sewing box, and cut her own throat.”

“…I see. That makes sense.”

Catching himself just before he visualized the girl’s death, Seiji shivered. Seeing a thing like that would give you nightmares for the rest of your life.

“My brother spiraled as well, so we sent him far away to convalesce with a relative who ran a clinic. You see, according to the doctor, my sister-in-law had been pregnant when she died.”

“That’s—”

It was too much for one person to handle. Even Suzuha might not have been able to rest in peace with so many lingering regrets.

“So Suzuha’s vengeful ghost manifested as a *nue*?”

“Yes. Ever since it happened, we’ve been hearing the cries of a *nue* coming from the little cottage away from the main house where she killed herself. It shrieks like someone on the verge of death.”

Seiji’s blood turned to ice in his veins. He wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to handle something like that.

“When exactly did the *nue* first begin to cry?”

“Three months ago.”

“My, my. Didn’t Suzuha die two years previously?”

“Just after my sister-in-law’s death, we had the head priest of a local shrine perform an exorcism where she died. He said that if we kept the cottage closed up and allowed no one to enter, there would be no curse. And for a while, it seemed to work.”

“So something happened?”

Rinko bit her lip. The set of her brow grew sterner, and her irritation began to show through. “Three months ago, my brother returned from the clinic where he’d been recovering. He ignored all our attempts to stop him and threw open the doors of the cottage. The *nue* has been crying ever since.”

“That’s—”

No wonder she was mad.

“Couldn’t you ask the same priest to perform a second exorcism?”

“He suffered a stroke last year. We’re told he can’t even speak anymore.”

It was just one thing after another.

“For the next three months, unfortunate events that seemed to be the work of a curse followed us everywhere we went.”

“What sort of events?”

“One of our subsidiary companies went bankrupt at the end of last year. Then, at the beginning of this year, my mother fainted from heart palpitations and was hospitalized. Thankfully, it was only temporary, and she was promptly discharged, but they suspect chronic heart failure. And this past month, we were forced to suffer the indignity of a broken engagement.”

Whose engagement? Seiji almost asked but quickly stopped himself. He'd seen the self-conscious smile on Rinko's lips. True, a string of so many disasters would make you want to believe in curses.

"Still, how did you know it was a *nue*?"

"Pardon?"

"You haven't seen it, have you? Assuming you know what you're dealing with based on nothing more than its cry seems rather reckless."

It was a reasonable question, but Rinko just smiled derisively. "The *nue*'s cry resembles a woman's scream, does it not?"

What was that?

Seiji shivered, feeling a chill run down his spine. He didn't know why, but just for a moment, he'd felt as if the young woman in front of him was some shadowy monster.

"When would you like us to call on you, then?"

"Tomorrow, if possible."

"My, that's quite sudden." Unusually for him, Shiroshi looked surprised.

From what Rinko told them, her family lived in a mountain village in Gunma Prefecture, two hours away by car. It would be a bit of a journey.

"I apologize for my somewhat unreasonable request. If you'd like, I'll send a car for you."

"No, that won't be necessary. I have a talented chauffeur."

"Oh… I see."

Good guess, but no. Rinko was eyeing Seiji suspiciously, but their actual chauffeur would be Beniko.

"Please take care of that *nue* for us. It's such a nuisance."

With that final icy remark, Rinko rose from her chair, and then—

Still clad in her ink-black kimono, she transformed into an enormous snake as thick as a log. It began slithering across the carpet, white scales shining.

"Yeek!"

Yanking his feet up onto his chair, Seiji hugged his knees and squeezed his eyes shut. He'd had a huge fear of snakes ever since he witnessed feeding time with Mack the snake on a trip to the zoo in grade school.

A hand patted him on the head. "She's gone."

When he opened his eyes, Shiroshi was smiling right at him. Rinko was nowhere to be seen.

Soon after…

“A snake, hmm?” When Seiji told him what he’d seen, Shiroshi folded his arms, looking rather surprised.

“Is that weird?”

“No, not at all. There are many yokai related to snakes: *jatai* and *nureonna*, just to name a few. There’s also the famous story of *The Legend of Doujouji*, in which the heroine, Kiyohime, transforms into a snake. However, considered in combination with the *nue*, there is one other possibility.”

He thought hard for a little while.

“Well, sometimes you just have to stick your hand into the viper’s nest,” he said finally.

Unfolding his arms, Shiroshi gave a mischievous smile.

“Let’s go slay the *nue*, shall we?”

*

They spent two and a half hours being jostled around in the car.

With Beniko at the wheel, their Rover Mini was heading into a winding mountain pass. Once they got through it, they’d be at their destination.

Looking down from that height, it was clear that most of the town was covered by forest. The small village seemed to cling like a barnacle to a scant patch of level ground in the folds of the mountains.

“The Shidou family has been in charge of governing this village for centuries, and they own vast tracts of land. All the forest in this area is theirs, and most of the schools, hospitals, and other public facilities survive on their investments and donations. Because of this, they seem to hold a kind of authority that places them above the law here, even in today’s day and age.”

Beniko filled them in as she drove. There wasn’t a hint of fatigue in her voice.

Sitting next to Seiji in the back seat, Shiroshi responded briefly; his eyes were narrowed against the wind that blew in through the window. His expression made him look like a contented cat. “In short, they’re ‘frogs in a well’: content in their

little village and ignorant of the outside world. Relics of a bygone era."

What a casually caustic individual.

As a freeloader, Seiji would have loved to hear Shiroshi's critical opinion of him. That said, Seiji had a sneaking suspicion he might never recover from hearing it, so he dropped that train of thought entirely.

"Oh, it appears we've arrived."

The place looked exactly as one would expect of any sparsely populated village.

Terraced rice fields had been carved out of the rolling forest. There was a little snow left on their banks, but the water in them shone, reflecting the blue sky like a mirror. The location did have a kind of scenic beauty; however, what lay before them wasn't a hot spring or fine local cuisine—it was the task of slaying a monstrous curse-inflicting bird.

"Still, it seems pretty odd, doesn't it?"

"What does?"

"*Nues* and curses. It just seems harder to believe in those sorts of things than not to."

In this modern age, there were adults who genuinely feared a curse living only two and a half hours from central Tokyo? That didn't make sense to him.

"Heh-heh. Then shall I leave vanquishing the *nue* to you, Seiji?"

"Hrrk?!"

"I'm only joking. However, the issue may lie with the location. There, you see?" Shiroshi was pointing at a grand residence that painted the very picture of a samurai family's manor. Its striking jet-black tiled roof and imposing grandeur gave the impression of a majestically reclining beast.

"Oh… Yeah, I see what you mean."

It did look like the sort of place that would have a monstrous bird or two haunting it. In fact, if someone had told Seiji that it *wasn't* haunted, he didn't know whether he'd believe them.

"I'll take my leave here, then."

"Yes, excellent work. Do be careful."

After dropping them off in front of the main gate, Beniko promptly made a U-turn and drove away. She'd had a traveling bag in the passenger seat next to her, so Seiji had assumed she'd

be staying with them, but apparently she was headed back to the house.

“Now then, shall we go?”

Young Shiroshi set off empty-handed, as if that were only natural, and Seiji followed him through the dignified tile-roofed gate.

Weighed down by their two matching travel bags, Seiji made his way along a flagstone walkway that had been meticulously swept clean. A large cherry tree stood in the front garden. The flowers probably wouldn’t open for a while yet; the buds seemed to huddle at the tips of the branches, trembling in the wind.

Just then, something darted out from behind the trunk of the tree.

“My, my. Have you come to greet us?”

The cat twined itself around Shiroshi’s ankles, its tail held high. Bending down, he gently stroked its back. “Heh-heh. Cats are rather precious, aren’t they?”

“Do you want one?”

“Hmm. I’m not sure. I already have you.”

Unbelievable. Apparently he *was* on the same level as a house cat.

“Then again, I have heard cats can be quite delicious.”

“Huh?”

Shiroshi had scooped the cat up onto his lap. Its eyelids drooped, spellbound by Shiroshi’s skillful paw massage. “People call them the blowfish of the land, but I’ve heard they yield a lot of scum when boiled, so preparing them can be quite difficult. Shall I ask Beniko to cook one up for us?”

“N-no thank you!”

There was no telling whether he was joking or serious. Seiji picked the cat up, planning to let it get away before it ended up in a hot pot, but the damn creature launched itself out of his arms and hissed at him, squaring up for a fight. Talk about unfair.

“Oh, you’ve arrived.”

Rinko appeared through the magnificent front entrance, which was crowned with an elegant arched gable. Her traditional clothes made her look right at home against the backdrop, as if she were the female head of an illustrious old family.

“Welcome. I’m glad you’re here. Thank you for accepting such a sudden request.”

“Not at all. Thank you for your invitation.” The cat had gone back to coiling itself around Shiroshi’s ankles, and after their formal exchange of greetings, he petted its head.

“It’s adorable,” he said, motioning to the cat. “Does it have a name?”

“Mikeko.”

“From *I Am a Cat*? If memory serves, that’s the young calico female who dies from a cold, is it not?”

“Indeed it is. And yet, our Mikeko is an old orange tabby tom. It’s a bit of a joke.” Her tone was bitter, and there was a cold, scornful barb to her expression.

“Who named him?”

“My second-oldest brother, Fumio.”

“Oh, you have another brother?”

“Yes.” Rinko nodded. She gave a rather discontented sigh. “He brought it home on a whim, then left the rest of us to take care of it. This, when the man himself is a deadbeat who loafs around more than the cat.”

“My, that’s rather harsh.”

“Anyone who takes three years to make it into college and then fails to secure a job must be completely immune to shame. And to top it all off, he brags about wanting to become a novelist. At least the cat catches mice.”

Who’d have thought Seiji had a compatriot way out here in the country?

Apparently public opinion regarding useless men was the same everywhere. The barrage of words ripped right through Seiji, leaving his heart in shreds. Noticing this, Shiroshi reassured him. “Don’t let it worry you. What’s good about you, Seiji, is that you know this about yourself.”

…Was it his imagination, or had that actually made it hurt more?

“How many people live in the mansion here?”

“Five, including the live-in housekeeper. There’s also one servant who goes home at night. Both have been with us for more than twenty years, since my father was head of the family.”

“There are four family members, then. Akihito, the oldest son; Fumio, the second son; you, the only daughter. And—”

Just then, a taxi pulled up outside the main gate, and a plump woman in traditional dress got out.

"And my mother, Tsuruko," Rinko said curtly. She trotted down the flagstone path and through the roofed gate. Before long, the pair's conversation became audible.

"You've been drinking during the day again?"

"Oh, don't say it like that. I only had a drop. I was invited to the grand opening of a new shop, so I couldn't very well refuse."

"That just sounds like an excuse for your drinking."

"Yes, yes, all right. Goodness, you're a difficult child to love."

Although what she said was insulting, her tone held definite affection and trust for her daughter.

However…

What appeared on the other side of the gate was a hairy tanuki dressed in a fine kimono.

"A—a tanuki?!"

He hadn't meant to say anything, but it came out anyway.

The figure gazed suspiciously at Seiji, and in the next moment, it shifted from a bipedal tanuki to a dignified middle-aged woman. Her face had most likely resembled Rinko's when she was young, but now it was puffy with sodium and alcohol.

"Who are these people?"

"Shiroshi Saijou, a psychic, and his assistant. I've invited them to stay with us for a few days."

"…A psychic?" Madam Tsuruko's eyebrows drew together with extreme skepticism. Apparently Rinko had made the decision to slay the *nue* on her own.

"I summoned them. I have no desire to spend any longer at the mercy of a curse—or whatever it is."

"You had no right! You didn't even discuss it with Akihito!"

"Enough! Whose fault do you think this is?!" Rinko's voice had grown harsh.

Just then, a woman's scream pierced the clear blue sky.

It sounded as if pain, loneliness, resentment, and grief were all being wrung from her entrails.

No, that wasn't it; this was—

"I see. That certainly is a *nue*," Shiroshi murmured. His voice sent a violent shudder down Seiji's spine. Rinko and Tsuruko exchanged startled looks, standing petrified where they were.

Only Shiroshi set off in the direction of the voice.

“You come, too, Seiji.”

Seiji had been about to quietly make his escape, but at that, he reluctantly followed his employer.

Passing a pond with a small bridge over it, they wove their way through artificially landscaped hills and pine trees, following a path of stepping stones deeper into the grounds.

“That must be the cottage.”

They’d reached a small outbuilding that was connected to the main house by a covered walkway. It appeared to have been built as a venue for tea ceremonies but had since been remodeled; it was surrounded on all sides by a veranda that was open to the elements.

“Oh!”

Without warning, the paper-latticed door slid open, and a figure emerged.

It was a man in his late twenties. His jet-black kimono and deep gray haori coat almost made him look like a shadow.

Akihito, the head of the Shidou family.

In the next moment, he transformed into a tiger.

Rippling muscles. Fierce, gleaming fangs. An ominous glare in its eyes. It set off toward the covered walkway, the veranda creaking heavily under its paws.

“Ah, agh— Gaaah?!”

Seiji had tripped over a stepping stone, his feet carrying him backward on reflex. The man didn’t seem to have noticed his scream, though: It seemed he really was hard of hearing.

“So he’s the tiger, then,” Shiroshi said, reaching out to help Seiji up. He sounded completely unconcerned.

“Huh? How did you know?”

Letting Seiji’s surprised question pass without comment, Shiroshi looked up at the cottage through narrowed eyes. His expression, once again, reminded Seiji of a purring cat.

“It seems the mansion truly is haunted by a *nue*,” he said.

*

The second-floor guest room they were shown to was a generous twelve square meters.

Its interior was unpretentious, but the low polished ebony table and decorative plate in the alcove—old Imari porcelain, according to Shiroshi—were clear signals of luxury. It wasn’t a

comfortable room for a commoner… Although Seiji suspected he should just be grateful Madam Tsuruko hadn't run them out.

After they'd set their luggage down next to the alcove and relaxed for a while, the housekeeper—a woman who introduced herself as Toshie Furuhashi—laid the table with a splendid dinner. Right about the time everything had been laid out and they were cheerfully picking up their chopsticks, ready to eat, clouds rolled in, and it began to drizzle. It seemed like a passing shower at first, unusual for this time of the year, but the sound of the rain kept growing more and more insistent.

"It's certainly coming down out there," Shiroshi said, glancing at the shoji screens that had been closed over the bay window.

"It really is. It was sunny just a little while ago, too."

"According to the weather report, we're going to have a spring storm. It's lucky we arrived early, isn't it?"

Yes, all praise be to Beniko.

And then…

"About the monsters you saw, Seiji," Shiroshi began suddenly, reaching for a piece of vegetable tempura with his chopsticks. "Rinko was a serpent; Madam Tsuruko, a tanuki; Akihito, a tiger. Which means that Fumio, the second son, is most likely a monkey."

"Huh? How do you know?"

"I suspected the four of them together may represent a single yokai. Serpent, tanuki, tiger—add a monkey, and we have all the components of a *nue*."

What did that mean?

"Essentially, the *nue* is a chimera composed of parts from four different animals: the head of a monkey, body of a tanuki, and legs of a tiger, with a snake for its tail."

"Um, so what you're saying is…?"

"It's conceivable that the *nue* represents a single sin lurking in this mansion, to which they were all accomplices."

"Huh? Then…"

"Yes. Every member of the Shidou family is a sinner who should be cast into Hell."

A chill ran through Seiji, and he shrank back into himself. He felt as if he'd unwittingly wandered into a den of monsters.

But that meant…

“Wait, then what’s the *nue* that’s supposed to be cursing the family?”

“Ah, that’s something else entirely. I have a general idea of its whereabouts, so we can take our time dealing with it.”

“You’re sure it’s okay to be so laid-back about this?”

“It’s fine. I assure you, it’s perfectly harmless.”

A harmless curse? What was that supposed to be? Seiji was doubtful, but he kept quiet and instead reached out with his chopsticks for a shrimp dumpling. It was exquisite.

“Hmm?” Shiroshi raised his head, chopsticks falling still. “I just heard a car.”

“Oh, really?”

Slowly getting to his feet, Shiroshi slid the shoji open. The lights of a taxi were visible outside the gate, shining in the downpour. Was it a visitor?

“…My, my,” Shiroshi murmured, his eyes suddenly uncertain. Seiji saw a look of surprise cross his face. Did Shiroshi know the new arrival?

Huh?

The second he set eyes on the individual who stepped out of the car, an inexplicable shudder worked its way down his spine.

Something’s here, he thought.

It felt as if he’d noticed a beast creeping toward him in the shadows.

The figure belonged to a gentleman in a suit. In the midst of the driving rain, the tall man strolled through the gate as if he was in no particular hurry, then paused, looking up.

Their eyes met.

Seiji got the feeling those eyes widened ever so slightly.

Deliberately setting his fingers on the brim of his hat, the man lifted it in greeting. The corners of his lips stretched wider and wider.

He’d smiled.

A second after Seiji came to this realization, the noise of the car’s engine hastily receded, leaving nothing but the sound of the rain in its wake. The figure below had vanished, swallowed up by the darkness.

“Just…” *Who was that?* Seiji had been going to say, when he heard Shiroshi whisper something.

“It appears we really are in for a storm.”

As soon as the words had escaped his lips, a sound came from outside their room.

“Excuse me.”

The housekeeper, Mrs. Furuhashi, opened the sliding door. Kneeling formally on the wooden floor, she looked at the two of them with eyes that seemed a little frightened.

“I’m terribly sorry to disturb your meal. Master Akihito has summoned you.”

*

When they followed Mrs. Furuhashi down to the first floor, they could tell that the rain had abruptly intensified. It was so heavy, it sounded as if someone had upended a bucket over the house.

By the time they were shown into the tatami-floored reception room, Rinko and Tsuruko were already there, but Akihito, who had summoned them all, had yet to arrive. Mother and daughter were deep in whispered conversation; grave looks etched on their faces, they paid no attention to Seiji and Shiroshi.

“They don’t seem as if they’d welcome questions about the situation.”

“…No, they really don’t.”

He and Shiroshi exchanged nods, then sat down toward the back of the room.

The door behind them suddenly slid open, and a hairy monster shambled in.

“Oh, a mon—”

Seiji had almost shouted *monkey!* and he hastily swallowed the word. When he made desperate eye contact with Shiroshi, the boy gave him a slight nod. Apparently he’d gotten the message.

The man who’d just entered was Fumio, the second son. At first glance, he appeared to be rather good-looking, but the gloomy dark circles beneath his eyes betrayed an unhealthy lifestyle. He had the look of a delicate, bookish young man who’d turned into an adult with his mental fragility very much intact. In another few years, that could be Seiji.

The last person to appear through the sliding door was Akihito, the head of the family. The hushed conversation

immediately fell silent, and the sound of rain dominated the room.

"Snake, tanuki, tiger, monkey. Here they all are," Shiroshi mused to himself, sounding entertained.

The sinners of the Shidou family had all assembled.

All of a sudden—

"Excuse me," said an unexpected voice.

A moment later, the door slid open with a forceful *clack*.

"I apologize for my tardiness. It took me some time to get changed."

The newcomer was a young man in Western clothes that stood out immediately in a place like this.

Like Seiji, he appeared to be in his early twenties. His slim-cut English suit, fedora hat, and slender walking stick suited him so well it looked almost snide. His handsome, finely molded features made him look like a supporting actor from a romcom, but the bold confidence with which he carried himself gave him the presence of an old star of the silver screen.

In a word: He was a smug, pretentious jerk.

"Wh-who are you?" Tsuruko asked.

"I beg your pardon. Allow me to introduce myself." With a crisp *snap*, a black business card appeared between his fingertips. The line of gold letters on it said RINDOU DETECTIVE AGENCY.

"Rindou Detective Agency? You don't mean...*that* one, do you?"

"And which one would *that one* be?"

Tsuruko was clearly bewildered, and the detective tilted his head as if he were mocking her.

"It's a rumor. There's an incredibly skilled detective in Tokyo who runs the Rindou Detective Agency, and while there's no case he can't solve, for some reason, someone involved always dies. However, I hear the ones who die are always bad people."

"Yes, I am he. Odoro Rindou. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Taking the comment in stride, he gave an affected bow.

Something tugged at Seiji's memory, and a startled "Oh!" escaped him.

The Detective Who Summons Death!

It was one of the urban legends he'd seen on Saori's blog. Who'd have thought the guy actually existed?

Madam Tsuruko was even more flustered than Seiji. She started to rise, seeming so dismayed that he almost felt bad for her. “Wh-what is the meaning of this? Why are you here?!”

“I was hired by the head of your family, who specifically requested my presence here tonight. Thanks to that, I got absolutely drenched.” He gave a light shrug. “Now then, may I ask why I was summoned?”

Akihito looked down at the floor. He was wearing a hearing aid now. “I have discovered a note that Suzuha left to me two years ago.”

Silence fell, and the few seconds it dominated the room seemed to last an eternity.

Slowly, Akihito’s glaring eyes scanned the assembly, finally coming to rest on the person next to Seiji. Fumio had gone pale, and his hands trembled on his knees.

He wasn’t the only one who was rattled. Abruptly, Tsuruko stood. “Th-that’s impossible! How could you have found a letter like this now, after all this time?!” She’d almost screamed the words, but no one responded.

Akihito’s face was as blank as a mask, and when he spoke, his voice sounded just as indifferent. “In it, she set down the truth of why she had to die. I intend to give that note to Mr. Rindou tomorrow morning—and to relate everything that once happened in this house to him.”

“Akihito!” Tsuruko shouted, as if she were scolding him. “Wh-what exactly do you intend to do?! You inherited this family from your father, and you’d destroy it?!” She was speaking as his mother. For a few brief moments, their roles as family member and patriarch had reverted to mother and child.

Still seated, Akihito responded with a deep bow. “Assume that the Shidou family will not survive the night. When dawn comes, the grudge of the *nue* will destroy this house.”

Then he stood and left the room.

Shouting “Wait!” Madam Tsuruko immediately went after him.

“Now then, a good evening to you all,” the detective said sarcastically, following his client out.

Seiji heard an irritated noise from across the room. Startled, he looked over to see Rinko rise to her feet, her face suffused with an anger that bordered on hatred.

The only ones left were Fumio, who was still dazed and trembling, and Seiji and Shiroshi, who'd been blithely ignored the entire time.

"So, uh, what do you suppose is going to happen now?"

"…A domestic bloodbath, if ever there was one."

*

When they got back to their room, Seiji felt the tension drain from his shoulders.

A world brimming over with the sordid ghastliness of one of Seishi Yokomizo's crime novels was too much for a modern kid to handle.

"Still, I don't get what's going on here at all," Seiji murmured.

"With a mind like yours, Seiji, I'd imagine not," Shiroshi responded, sounding as if he genuinely meant it.

This kid was so constantly and reliably condescending that he might as well have been looking down on mere mortals from the vault of heaven itself.

"By the way, who's that Odoro Rindou guy?"

"Put simply, he's a business colleague of mine."

"Huh? Wait— You mean he does proxy work for Hell, too?"

"We're what's commonly termed 'destined rivals,' but I confess it's never felt real to me." Shiroshi folded his arms, looking unusually troubled.

That made sense. He really didn't seem compatible with phrases like *worthy opponent* and *fateful showdown*, which sounded as if they'd come straight out of some shounen manga.

"As I've mentioned, my father is Sanmoto Gorouzaemon, one of the self-declared demon kings. My rival's father is the other claimant, Shinno Akugorou."

Incredible. So two princes of the demon realm had just run into each other at the same house?

"As a bit of background on the two, the *Ino Mononoke Roku* began with a trial of strength between Demon King Sanmoto Gorouzaemon and Evil God Shinno Akugorou. They decided that whichever of them was the first to frighten a hundred courageous youths would become the true king."

According to Shiroshi, Sanmoto Gorouzaemon had been in the lead, however his eighty-sixth youth had been Ino Heitarou, who hadn't so much as turned a hair to any of his efforts. This

meant that, although he'd nearly reached the finish line, Sanmoto Gorouzaemon had to start all over again from the beginning, and the duel had been carried over to his son's generation.

"Huh? Wait a second, he got sent back to the starting line when he only had fourteen left? That means he basically lost, right? But they called it a draw?"

"While it is quite embarrassing for me to admit, my father has a certain talent for muddying the waters. I believe he somehow managed to reframe it as a tie."

Well, he clearly wasn't a man of admirable character. Seiji really hoped he never ran into him, but for some reason, he was getting an extremely bad feeling about this.

"And so, this battle between the two demon kings was passed down to the next generation. As they were wondering how to settle it, Great King Enma proposed this proxy service for Hell."

The first one to reveal the sins of a hundred wicked people and send them to Hell would be named king of the demon realm. In addition to making this proclamation, the Great King had volunteered to referee, and it had come down to this detectives' battle of wits.

Seiji got the feeling that they'd both been discreetly manipulated into doing Great King Enma's work for him…

"So, um, you're saying you've been in competition with Odoro all this time?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm working as hard as I possibly can to meet my quota."

"…Be honest: You're losing, right?"

"My, that's quite a sharp observation for you."

"I'm right, though, aren't I? You're taking it too slow. I mean, nobody's come to the house in the past two months. Right?"

"Heh-heh-heh. That's just your imagination." Shiroshi gave a composed smile.

He's totally lying, Seiji thought to himself.

"Still, this has become rather troublesome. It's very likely that the *nue* you saw is the only hidden sin in this house, and yet there are two *oni* here to pass judgment on it. We're in the midst of a head-on collision."

"Is it going to be a 'whoever gets there first' sort of thing? Or are you going to play rock-paper-scissors for it?"

"It appears that's about to be explained to us."

He was just about to ask *By who?* when it happened:

The *nue*'s cry ripped through the still night.

Seiji jumped, startled. In the same moment, Shiroshi slid the inner window open.

The storm seemed to have abated already. The rain clouds had begun to break up, and a white half-moon was rising.

Just then, the grove of trees rustled as if it had been struck by a sudden shower, and a blue sphere of ghostly light materialized in the moonlight that streamed through the window. As Seiji began to wonder if it would burst into flames, the glowing ball suddenly resolved itself into a figure: a man dressed in Heian-period robes.

Although his countenance was virile and good-looking, his serene shape was as imposing as a boulder. He was as tall as a basketball player, easily over 180 centimeters tall.

"It has been quite some time since last we spoke. I am here on behalf of Great King Enma, on His Majesty's orders."

"Oh, it's you, Takamura? It's good to see you're looking well."

"And you, Master Shiroshi. I'm pleased to find you in good health."

Apparently this was an old friend. Since he'd literally appeared out of the ether inside their room and hadn't been met with a complaint, they had to be pretty close.

"Well, well. And who may this be?"

"Seiji Tohno. He's currently living with me as a dependent."

The word *assistant* had finally dropped out of his title completely.

"This is Takamura Ono. Born during the Heian period, he's an accomplished man who has remained a person of influence in the underworld even after his death."

"You flatter me; however, I am merely a servant of His Majesty's court."

"In actual fact, he began serving as Great King Enma's adviser during his lifetime. I'm told that after finishing his duties at the imperial court during the day, he traveled down a well to the underworld and went to work again in Hell."

Wow, working two jobs around the clock: the ideal corporate wage slave. Seiji gazed at the man with respect in spite of himself. Noticing, Takamura nodded to him with a shy smile. *Yeah, he seems like a good guy*, Seiji found himself thinking.

“In any case, I have been sent to explain the details of this matter to you.”

“First come, first served, I imagine?”

“In short, yes. Whoever manages to reveal all existing crimes and hand down judgment the fastest shall be deemed the victor.”

“Huh? But the other guy was hired by the head of the family, wasn’t he? Won’t that give us a disadvantage?” Uncharacteristically, Seiji was interrupting. For net café vagabonds, hanging out in convenience stores and browsing manga for free every day was basically routine work, which meant he had a soft spot for phrases like *no-holds-barred* and *single combat*.

“I am well aware of the need for fairness. However, upon looking into the Mirror of Retribution, it appears that neither party has a significant advantage over the other in terms of information,” Takamura answered solemnly.

“Ah yes, I see. Thank you for taking the extra trouble.” Shiroshi nodded, looking satisfied.

As usual, Seiji was the only one who wasn’t following this. “Um, what’s the Mirror of Retribution?”

“Another magic mirror, similar to the *ungaikyou*. It records every action that occurs in this world in meticulous detail.”

So were magic mirrors basically like all-purpose items?

“While I’m sure you are already aware, let me remind you that if there is any error in the charge brought against the criminal or regarding the adjudication, the full punishment of the sentence will be transferred onto the arbiter.”

“I’ll make sure to take your warning to heart.”

“The competition will officially begin tomorrow. I must ask both of you to refrain from going out tonight.”

“Understood.”

At that, the look in Takamura’s eyes softened. It seemed he’d finished performing his official duties. “Very well. I will pray for your good fortune in battle.” He gave a deferential bow, then simply vanished like the flame of an extinguished candle.

Shiroshi had been waving to him casually but stopped in mid-gesture. “My, my. The *nue*’s no longer crying.”

For some reason, Seiji shivered. The surrounding silence suddenly felt as ominous as the grave.

“That’s very interesting, isn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you suppose he went out of his way to say things would begin *tomorrow*? Perhaps something’s going to happen tonight.”

Shiroshi clapped his hands together lightly, just once.

“That’s an idea. Seiji, would you do me a small favor?”

*

The night was so black it felt as if someone had put a lid on the world.

In the midst of the inescapable darkness, a half-moon floated in a gap between the clouds, as if part of a stage set. And yet, despite this, the most difficult thing about the night was still—

“It’s s-so c-c-cold.”

It was already early spring, but the temperature in these mountain villages dropped precipitously at night.

Seiji had on a thick down jacket, a scarf, and woolen gloves, but even bundled up in all this heavy-duty gear, trying to light a cigarette with shaking fingers, he felt just like the little match girl.

Still, he crouched in the rhododendrons, squeezing his lifeline—a disposable hand warmer—and bravely keeping up his watch on the cottage.

It had all started an hour ago.

“Huh? A stakeout? But didn’t Takamura just say not to go outside?”

“It’s fine. By ‘both of you,’ he meant myself and Odoro. You weren’t part of it, Seiji.”

“R-really?”

“…Probably.”

“Heeeeey!!”

“Regardless, it’s undeniable that the situation has acquired a distinctly ominous air. If we’re able to prevent a crime in advance, it would be best to do so. The fewer Hell-bound sinners there are, the better.”

His last remark had clued Seiji in about why Shiroshi was losing this contest, which was also why Seiji didn’t have an issue helping him.

That said, the ground was muddy from the rain, which meant that he had to squat the entire time, making his back

ache. It was nearly ten at night. So far, no one had entered or left the cottage, and he hadn't heard a sound from inside.

"Haaah, just my luck."

Would dawn really come? It felt as if morning was gradually getting further and further away.

"Huh?"

The light in the cottage had suddenly gone out.

No one had left the cottage, so had Akihito just gone to bed?

Seiji was dying to crawl into a nice warm bed, too, but there were still eight hours left until sunrise. He would have liked a slightly more comfortable hiding place, at least, but—

"Hmm? Hang on."

He'd just had a brain wave.

The cottage was surrounded by that exposed veranda. If he crawled under there, wouldn't it make for a perfect windbreak? Plus, if he posted himself under the spot where the veranda and the covered walkway met, he'd be able to tell when anyone entered or left by the footsteps overhead.

"Okay. I'm going for it."

Once he'd made up his mind, execution was the order of the day.

He crawled under the veranda, aiming for the point just before the walkway. The concrete foundation was surprisingly comfortable, and when he lay on his back, it felt just like a stone bed.

However…

Maybe it was because he'd relaxed a bit, but he was starting to feel terribly drowsy. Taking a catnap wouldn't hurt anything, would it?

If anyone crossed that walkway, the boards would creak like crazy. If they made a noise like that right over his head, he was bound to wake up. It was a natural alarm clock.

Silently murmuring *Just a few minutes* to himself, Seiji softly closed his eyes.

Yeah, just a few minutes…

……*Zzzzz.*

*

Skrrt, skrrt.

A hot, wet sensation on his cheek woke him up, and the first thing he saw was an extreme close-up of two glaring eyes.

“Bwaaaah!”

He let out a scream, which caused the shadow to leap off his chest and sprint away.

It was the cat.

“Huh? Where am—? Gah!”

Sitting up hastily, Seiji had whacked his head hard. That jogged his memory: He was in the space under the veranda, right in front of the covered walkway. Which meant that the white light filtering in through the gaps in the boards was—

“I—I overslept!”

He checked his phone; 6:00 AM. He’d accidentally conked out for a whole eight hours. What had happened in the cottage between then and now?

“Hmm?”

Crawling out from underneath the veranda, Seiji took a fearful look at the cottage. He blinked. *Huh? The door…*

It was standing slightly open.

That gap looked like an invitation, and it made Seiji very uneasy.

Just then, the orange tabby from earlier—Mikeko—jumped up onto the veranda. Teasing the door open a little farther with his front paw, he slipped into the cottage.

“Oh— Hey!” he yelled, forgetting himself for the moment, but there was no response from inside. Was the man still asleep, or had he taken his hearing aid off?

…What’s going on?

That bad feeling wasn’t getting any better.

Deciding that at this point he might as well check, he steeled himself, tiptoed over to the gap, and peeked in.

“Huh?”

His field of vision was suddenly, inexplicably filled with the corpse of a tiger.

The traditional room had a paper-lattice window at the back, directly opposite the door. The tiger lay on its stomach with its toes pointed toward the window. One front paw hung limply at its side, twisted at the wrist so that it faced outward.

Fierce fangs peeked out from between the tiger’s lips, and its golden eyes were slightly clouded.

The strange thing about the entire scene, though, was that the tatami flooring was littered with foil blister packs, several prescription medication bags of the kind given out by hospitals, and a whole lot of pills. That, and the empty whiskey glass.

The tiger seemed to have killed itself by overdosing.

"—Huh?"

He blinked, and a moment later…

Those hollow gold eyes shifted into the white and black of human eyes.

"Ah, aaaah, ah!"

In the blink of an eye, the tiger's tawny, black-striped pelt resolved itself into a familiar figure in a haori coat. The second he realized he was looking at Akihito's corpse, a scream tore its way out of Seiji's throat.

*

Akihito was dead.

Even when Seiji dashed into the guest room to tell him about it, almost in tears, Shiroshi didn't seem disturbed. "That's unfortunate. Well, I suppose it was quite typical of you, Seiji," he added, completely unnecessarily.

After taking his time getting dressed, Shiroshi made for the cottage. Seiji suspected that even if this kid were told that the world was going to end tomorrow, his only comment would be *My, my*.

Rinko and Mrs. Furuhashi were already there when they arrived, apparently having heard Seiji scream.

Since the corpse's eyes had begun to cloud over, it didn't take a medical degree to know there was no hope of reviving him, and the two women simply stood there at a loss.

From the whispered snatches of conversation he heard, the scattered packaging belonged to two types of medication—sleeping pills and sedatives—and both had been prescribed to Akihito at the clinic where he'd been treated.

Did that mean this really was a suicide by overdose?

"Listen, Shiro—"

As Seiji started to speak, he realized Shiroshi wasn't next to him anymore. He'd begun to walk restlessly around the room, inspecting the site. He'd stopped in front of the alcove,

murmuring “My, my” to himself, and tilted his head pensively. Apparently something in there had caught his attention.

Come to think of it, this is the first time we’ve been in here.

The cottage was about twelve square meters, and unusually for this sort of room, the spot beside the alcove featured a built-in closet. A low writing desk with a pen stand and a box of paper sat under the window at the back. The mirrored dressing stand in the corner had probably belonged to Suzuha; the cloth covering the mirror was decorated with a cute cherry blossom motif.

And…

“How splendid,” Shiroshi said, as if he couldn’t help himself.

The haori hanging on the kimono rack looked almost like a painted screen.

The image printed on the silk showed large peony blossoms and a fearless Chinese lion. Although the scene was a fantasy, the delicate brushstrokes gave it an air of photographic realism. At any moment, it seemed as if the flowers might sway in the wind and they’d hear the lion’s roar.

“Peonies and a Chinese lion. That motif has been a favorite on door paintings and kimonos since antiquity. Because Chinese lions are said to rest beneath peony flowers at night, the pairing is thought to symbolize a fine match.”

“Huh… I guess it’s supposed to bring good fortune, then.”

“However, when Akihito gave it to Suzuha, he may have had another interpretation in mind.”

The way he’d phrased that seemed significant.

Shiroshi resumed his investigation, and this time he made a “Hmm” sound in front of the desk. Seiji felt as if he could use an explanation pretty soon.

“Well, what first caught my attention was the hearing aid and fountain pen. You see how they’re both on the right-hand side of the desk? From the fact that the pen is uncapped, he may have been writing something last night. Which means…”

Bending down, Shiroshi caught the edge of the floor cushion to the left of the desk and flipped it over.

“What are you doing?”

“The position of the cushion seemed unnatural. Ordinarily, he would have set his pen and hearing aid on the desk while kneeling on this cushion, yet both would be out of reach from

here. That makes it natural to assume that someone intentionally moved it… Ah yes, there it is."

When Seiji peeked over his shoulder, he saw a black stain right where the floor cushion had been.

"An ink stain from the fountain pen."

"Um, meaning…?"

"Meaning Akihito was writing at the desk when the culprit attacked him. He appears to have removed his hearing aid, so no doubt he wouldn't have noticed the footsteps creeping closer. It's possible that he was in the habit of removing his hearing aid when he was alone."

"W-wait just a minute! A-attacked? But Akihito killed himself, didn't he?" Seiji asked, desperately keeping his voice down.

"Oh my," Shiroshi said, blinking at him as if he hadn't expected this. "I just assumed you'd noticed. That's you all over, Seiji." Looking deeply impressed, he patted Seiji on the head.

…It was getting to the point where he could probably plead extenuating circumstances if he bit the kid.

"We call this a cover-up. There are too many odd things about the deceased to consider this an intentional overdose."

"Like what?"

"Let's see. First, why do you suppose Akihito's eyes are still open?"

"Huh?"

He was right: Although the corpse was lying on its stomach, its eyelids were open.

But…

"Um, isn't it because he was in pain as he was dying? You know, you see it in detective shows and things. The victim drinks poison and immediately goes 'Ghk!'"

"If it were another type of poison, then perhaps. However, the medications we're dealing with here are sleeping pills and sedatives. Since both operate by suppressing activity in the central nervous system, any overdose would instead induce a coma. That is to say, you'd fall asleep, and then the drugs would kill you."

Oh.

If that was true, then the state of the corpse really didn't seem right.

"Then what actually killed—?"

Before he could finish the question, a voice suddenly spoke up from behind them. “Mr. Tohno?”

Looking over his shoulder, he saw Rinko standing there. Her face was pale, but there were no tears in her eyes. “May I ask you a question? That scream earlier was yours, wasn’t it?”

“Y-yes. I stumbled onto Akihito’s corpse by accident.”

“What were you doing at the cottage this morning?”

“Huh?”

“You went out into the garden, didn’t you? I saw a pair of sneakers cast off just in front of the covered walkway.”

Sh-she’s sharp.

“Oh, um, I thought I’d go for a walk.”

“You have sand on your back and on the back of your head.”

“I-I’m a restless sleeper. Maybe I fell into the garden while I was asleep.”

“…From a second-story window?”

Help!

Shiroshi seemed to have caught Seiji’s SOS. “You said your brother was fond of antiques,” he broke in. “He seems to have had a very good eye for them.”

Rinko’s gaze turned distant. “He was a living example of the proverb ‘What one likes, one will do well.’ He’d always loved old tools and works of art, and he thought they should be used and appreciated in everyday life. Even after becoming Father’s right-hand man, he traveled to many different places on the pretext of making business trips.”

There was a wry smile in her voice, but it also held clear affection for her deceased brother. She might have been trying to take the edge off her sadness by talking with other people.

“Then Akihito also purchased the incense burner in the alcove?”

When Seiji looked over, he noticed a jade-colored incense burner on an ebony stand. It had been positioned so that two of its three short legs faced the room, and its domed lid was ornamented with precise, elaborate metalwork.

“Yes, it was a bargain he found at an antique market in Kyoto. When he had it appraised by an expert, he was told it was almost certainly Kinuta celadon.”

“My, that’s very impressive.”

As usual, all of this was going way over Seiji’s head. “Um, so what is it?”

“Kinuta celadon refers to a specific type of celadon porcelain that was fired at the Longquan kilns in China’s Zhejiang Province during the thirteenth century. This is a *hakamagoshi*-style incense burner. Its shape resembles a person wearing *hakama* trousers, doesn’t it? Hence its name.”

Hmm. It still wasn’t clicking for him.

“So how much would this cost?”

“Well, let’s see. If it’s genuine, I would put it at around three million yen.”

“Huh?! Three—”

It just looked like a stocky, bloated ashtray with a lid to him.

“Do any other members of your family have an interest in antiques?”

“Fumio seems to collect them as well, as a way of competing with our older brother.”

“My, both of your brothers, then.”

“But although he loves antiques, he has no eye for them. He lets disreputable brokers flatter him into buying pieces that are basically rubbish.” Rinko sighed. “Why—?”

Hasty footsteps approached, cutting Rinko off midsentence. It was Madam Tsuruko.

“No!” A voice that was somewhere between a shriek and a sob escaped her pale lips. Rinko automatically reached out to support her, but the woman slipped through her hands, crumpling to her knees.

“Why not Fumio? Why did it always have to be him?”

When he heard that hoarse whisper, Seiji got the feeling he knew what Rinko had been about to say: Why hadn’t her younger brother been the one to die?

Isn’t that going too far?

Sure, people weren’t created equal. But even so, nobody could hear *You should have been the one to die* from their family and respond with *Yeah, you’re right*.

Just at that moment—

Sensing someone behind him, Seiji turned and saw Fumio’s pale white face. Apparently the man had been unlucky enough to catch Tsuruko’s remark. In fact, maybe she’d made sure he heard it.

“You’re late. Even at a time like this, you sleep in?”

Showing surprising fortitude, Tsuruko rose to her feet. Seiji had assumed her face would be wet with tears, but her eyes

were perfectly dry, and they seemed to pierce right through her second-born son.

"Wha…? Wha—?"

Before their very eyes, Fumio's face turned from white to red—the color of rage. Just as he was about to start yelling, though, the door slid open behind him with a sharp *clack*.

"Pardon the lateness; I have low blood pressure."

Odoro Rindou had arrived. Watching the astounded group out of the corner of his eye, he stepped inside, moving far too boldly for a latecomer. "Don't mind me. Please, carry on," he said brashly, before taking a turn around the room, as if he'd just come in for a stroll.

He peeked into the alcove with a "Hmm," then glanced at the writing desk and murmured, "Oh-ho." After that, he pushed the cushion out of the way with the tip of his cane and raised one eyebrow. He was doing exactly what a certain someone else had done.

But the way he kept his left hand in his coat pocket the entire time seemed pointlessly affected.

"I—I wasn't asleep. I was calling the police and the hospital director. I just couldn't seem to get through…"

When Seiji turned toward the faint voice, Fumio was standing there, mumbling excuses, his fists clenched. As a fellow member of the genus *NEET* of the family *shut-in*, Seiji was listening and feeling very nervous for him when—

"That's probably due to the rain last night."

Unexpectedly, Odoro threw Fumio a lifeline. Having finished inspecting the corpse, he was on his way back to the alcove again. "According to the news, which I watched when I awoke this morning, there was a landslide on the mountain pass that happened to engulf several cars. Your family physician's name was listed among the missing. No doubt the disaster is keeping the police occupied as well."

"Of all times…," Tsuruko muttered, sounding furious.

True, if police and the doctor brushed you off with a *We don't have time for that right now* when there was a corpse right in front of you, it *would* make you want to slap somebody.

"For now, let's take Akihito's body to the main house. I refuse to leave him in a place like this for one second longer," she spat out. Her eyes were fixed on the kimono rack, and something very close to hatred lurked within them.

“Your feelings are understandable, but I cannot allow you to indiscriminately move the body,” Odoro broke in. “After all, this is a murder scene.”

“How could you say that…?! Akihito’s death was a suicide!” Tsuruko said vehemently, rebuffing him. “I had a premonition of this last night. I was telling Rinko that we needed to send him back to the clinic as soon as we possibly could, and she agreed. My son has attempted suicide over and over again, ever since he lost his wife. Yesterday evening, his mind seemed to be in a particularly poor state.”

“Then what of the note he spoke of?”

“The ravings of a madman,” Tsuruko told him firmly. There was no hesitation in her face. She bowed her head very deeply to Odoro. “After his wife died, we searched every corner of the mansion in case she had left a suicide note. Nothing like that could possibly turn up now, so long after it happened. It must all have been an insane delusion. As an apology, I’ll add a bonus to your retaining fee; however, I must kindly ask you to please leave this house.”

“Unfortunately, that won’t be possible. The scene of the crime has been so obviously falsified that Akihito’s death can no longer be claimed as a suicide.” Odoro’s terse rejection left Tsuruko speechless.

Then, acting as if it caused him no small amount of trouble, the man crouched down in front of the corpse and opened one of its eyelids with a white-gloved hand. “Do you see these pinprick-like marks on the underside of the eyelid? Those are called petechiae, marks created when oxygen-starved capillaries burst. Furthermore, while it’s quite subtle now, we can see that the face is congested with blood, and there are signs of cyanosis. Taken together, all these details point to suffocation as the most likely cause of death. Also…”

He reached for the base of the corpse’s neck. “At the back of the neck, near the hairline, there’s a faint white line. It’s the sort of mark that would result from being garroted. From the way it crosses at the back of the neck, the victim was attacked from behind. Plain and simple, this was murder by strangulation.”

The group stared at him, dumbstruck, and he gave them a rather chilly look. “Are there any objections?”

Coming to her senses before any of the others, Tsuruko gasped. “Impossible. It can’t be; it simply can’t! There are no

signs of a struggle, and the room hasn't been ransacked… If they weren't looking to steal something, then why?!"

"Look at Akihito's right hand, if you would."

"Pardon?"

"When an individual falls face down, it's natural for the palms of the hands to turn inward, toward the body. However, Akihito's hand is twisted at the elbow facing outward, meaning that we should assume someone moved it postmortem."

Looking at the body, Seiji saw that the palm of Akihito's right hand was facing outward, and now that he thought about it, that pose really did seem unnatural.

"The culprit was most likely attempting to search the front of Akihito's kimono; they moved the arm because it was in their way. In light of the events of yesterday evening, it's reasonable to assume they were looking for the note Akihito mentioned, meaning that whoever did this was there last night— One of you."

Odoro finally withdrew his hand from his jacket pocket. He was holding a flip phone.

"When I sent these observations to an acquaintance of mine at the Metropolitan Police Department, along with a number of photos, I received the following response."

Apparently he'd been writing the text in his pocket, blind, so that no one would notice. He held up the phone, and the message displayed on its LCD screen said:

None of you people move until I get there. And, Rindou, this time I'm definitely gonna kill you.

Was it Seiji's imagination, or had that text come with a casual death threat?

"…Ah. On holiday, was he?" Odoro muttered. Turning his back on the stunned assembly, he set off smartly, as if to say his job was done. Seiji was pretty sure he heard the man stifle a yawn.

"And on that note, I'm going back to bed. The pass won't be open until tomorrow at the earliest in any case."

Just as he slid the door open, Odoro paused. Glancing back over his shoulder, he raised an eyebrow politely and addressed the room. "Please forgive me if I offended you. This is just who I am."

The moment Seiji heard that, he was positive.

This guy is absolutely the same type as Shiroshi.

“Now then, a good day to you all.”

With that last tongue-in-cheek remark, he closed the door.

For a full minute afterward, nobody spoke. Then, like a delayed reaction, there was an explosion of screams and shouts.

“Wh-what’s wrong with that man?! Even for a joke, that was unacceptable!”

“I told you! I said we should call the clinic and have them come for him immediately, even if it was the middle of the night! If only you hadn’t decided to be so charitable, Mother. Then this never would have happened!”

In the midst of the confusion, only Madam Tsuruko kept her composure. “I’ll call the lawyer,” she said with a sigh. “You come, too, Rinko.”

“What about me…?” Fumio murmured.

Rinko snickered. “Why not go back to bed?”

“Wha—?!”

“We are in the presence of the dead. Control yourself.”

On the verge of flying into a rage, Fumio had been struck still by his mother’s cold remark.

Left with no way to vent his anger, the man apparently decided to take it out on someone else. Bumping aggressively into Seiji’s shoulder, Fumio shouted “Move it!” and stormed off.

Way to make him feel like an idiot for pitying his fellow NEET. Now, what should he turn *his* anger on…?

“I’ll give you some pocket money later,” Shiroshi said consolingly, patting him on the shoulder.

Hmm. Maybe he could let the guy run into him one more time.

*

Seiji and Shiroshi went back to their room together.

Not even really thinking about it, Seiji was about to pull open the sliding door when Shiroshi suddenly crouched down in the hallway.

“My, my.”

He picked up a pine needle, holding it delicately between his fingertips. It appeared to be from one of the pine trees in the garden, but what was it doing here?

“Something smells here.”

“You mean resin? From the pine needle?”

“Heh-heh. No, not like that. Anyway, for now, let’s wait and see what they do.”

As responses went, that one was pretty opaque.

He and Shiroshi started playing tic-tac-toe to kill time. As usual, Seiji was getting his butt handed to him when they heard a car engine. Looking outside, they saw a fancy black car stopped outside the main gate. Was that the lawyer?

“Now then, best be on our way.”

“Huh? Where to?”

“To slay the *nue*.”

Giving him a mischievous smile, Shiroshi set off for the cottage at a leisurely pace.

Madam Tsuruko and Rinko weren’t there; they were probably speaking with the lawyer. In fact, Seiji didn’t even see the corpse. Had they already taken it to the main house?

Still, what did Shiroshi mean by “slay the *nue*”?

Ignoring Seiji’s uneasy expression, Shiroshi strode over to the closet. “I believe this to be the *nue*’s hiding place.”

“Eegh?!”

“Heh-heh-heh. It won’t bite. Let’s take a look, shall we?”

As he spoke, Shiroshi pulled open the sliding door, while Seiji timidly peeked in from behind him.

Aside from a futon that had been stuffed into its lower compartment, the closet was practically empty. There was no sign of a *nue* anywhere.

“Oh, yes, up there.” Shiroshi’s pale finger pointed to the closet’s upper compartment. When Seiji looked, he realized that one of the ceiling boards had been removed. The yawning patch of darkness seemed to open into the attic.

“I’m sorry to ask, but would you climb up onto the shelf and look into that hole?”

“Um, like this…? Whoa!” The stench of wild animals hit Seiji full in the face, and he leaned back fast to avoid it. It smelled like a cage at the zoo.

“Bring it out here, if you would. Carefully now, don’t drop it.”

The attic had been hiding a metal animal cage.

Inside was a dead bird about the size of a small chicken. Its tawny feathers were densely covered in a scaly pattern that ran from the tip of its head all the way down its back.

“A tiger thrush,” Shiroshi observed, nodding in satisfaction. “Its cry sounds like a woman shrieking, so it’s long been

considered an ill omen. The word *nue* was actually first used to refer to the tiger thrush; however, as the elusive monster's cry resembles that of the bird, the two gradually got conflated."

"By that, you mean…"

"Yes, the *nue* that has been haunting the cottage was this tiger thrush," Shiroshi told him quite casually.

Seiji felt dizzy. So the terrifying sound they'd been hearing had been nothing more than the song of a wild bird?

"Akihito was its owner. While it's technically illegal to trap or keep wild birds, it is possible to acquire one if you spend enough money. And since they're omnivores, they can even be fed dog food."

"When did you figure this out?" Even as he asked, Seiji remembered an earlier exchange with Shiroshi:

"I have a general idea of its whereabouts, so we can take our time dealing with it."

"You're sure it's okay to be so laid-back about this?"

"It's fine. I assure you, it's perfectly harmless."

Had Shiroshi already known what they were dealing with and where it was way back then?

"Yes, I realized the true nature of our *nue* when Rinko told us its cry resembled a woman's shriek. That cry also gave me an idea of where it was. The clues were the time and the weather."

"What d'you mean?"

"Tiger thrushes are nocturnal, so they never call during the day unless it's rainy or overcast. Despite this, the first time we heard it was on a sunny afternoon, which led me to assume that it was being kept somewhere without light, such as a closet or attic."

"Huh… I see."

He understood the logic but still couldn't figure out the really important part: If the *nue* possessing the cottage had been a tiger thrush…

"Then what was the *nue*'s curse?"

"In all probability, a figment of their collective imagination."

That couldn't be right!

"Heh-heh. Most 'jinxes' and 'curses' are like that. For example, say you visit a shrine at the House of the Ox, in the small hours of the morning, to place a lethal curse on someone. They go there in the dead of night, wearing an iron circlet surrounded by candles on their head. It's an eye-catching way

to dress that makes it more likely that people will see you and start rumors, which makes the ‘curse’ more effective.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes. After all, the mere thought that they might be cursed to death is enough to make most people ill one way or another.”

True, just imagining it was making him feel kind of queasy.

“So, basically, it was the placebo effect?”

“In the sense that it works by suggestion, yes, it’s similar. The belief that they have been cursed produces the same ill effects one would get from an actual curse.”

…Huh? Hang on a second.

“But Rinko said one of their subsidiaries went bankrupt at the end of last year.”

“Small and midsize companies are statistically more likely to go bankrupt toward the end of the year in any case. I would imagine it was a coincidence.”

“And Tsuruko was hospitalized at the start of this year.”

“Alcohol consumption increases during the New Year’s holidays. In combination with the stress from the bankrupt subsidiary, it’s no wonder she collapsed.”

“Then is that why Rinko’s engagement fell through, too?”

“Yes, that was likely due to stress. If either party’s irritation becomes apparent, it stands to reason that any feelings of romantic love will fade.”

He sure didn’t sugarcoat anything.

“And that was precisely what Akihito intended. By making the *nue* cry in the cottage, he invited misfortune into his family. It could be that he was simply trying to make them remember Suzuha’s death, reminding them not to forget their crime.”

Shiroshi stroked the tiger thrush’s corpse sympathetically. “Its neck is broken. It was strangled, just like Akihito.”

“Who would do that?”

“Most likely the same culprit.”

Seiji felt a pang of guilt. He really should have faced this sooner, but… “If I hadn’t dozed off, they wouldn’t have died.”

Shiroshi had had a feeling that something might happen that night, which was why he’d sent Seiji to keep watch. But Seiji had ruined everything.

Despite this, Shiroshi shook his head lightly. “I think you have the wrong idea. Before you began your nap— No, by the

time you started keeping watch, I believe they were already dead."

"Huh?"

"Think about it: Akihito was killed while he was writing. At the very least, he can't have gone to bed before it happened, yet you saw the lights in the cottage go out."

"Oh!"

He'd just assumed Akihito had turned them off, but if it had been the killer…

"Which would mean that he had already been killed. The last time the *nue* cried was at approximately nine in the evening, so the crime probably happened at about the same time. When they heard the *nue* in the closet, the murderer realized what the curse actually was."

"Huh? Then when I was watching the cottage—"

"Yes, they were inside the entire time. Either they took a very long time to falsify the crime scene, or their search dragged on… I'd imagine it was the latter."

"But why would they turn off the lights?"

"Most likely to make it seem as if Akihito had gone to bed. If the lights were on, someone might have stopped by without warning. If they used their smartphone as a flashlight, they would still be able to see reasonably well."

"Huh? But…" At that point, something struck Seiji as odd. "Then the murderer was still in there when I went underneath the veranda?"

"Yes, in all probability."

"But that can't be right. That would mean they walked right over my head and went back to the main house, right? If the veranda had creaked above me, I would've woken up right away. I'm such a light sleeper that any noise wakes me up."

He was absolutely positive about that one, and Seiji's confidence came through in his voice. But Shiroshi just shook his head, a pitying look in his eyes. "As long as they knew where you were hiding, it would be simple. They merely needed to avoid the spot just before the covered walkway; stepping down into the garden before they reached it would suffice. And if they walked along the strip of concrete that surrounds the cottage, they would leave no footprints."

"W-wait, time-out! They can't be psychic. How did they know I was under the veran—?"

“You snore.”

That left him speechless.

“It’s quite loud. Since you’re young and thin, volume like that may be a sign that something’s not quite right, so let’s see a doctor about it once we get home.”

Shiroshi looked at Seiji, a concerned expression on his face. His eyes held the same fondness as a pet owner who’d decided to take their dog to the vet.

“Th-then the murderer heard me snoring?”

“And very likely, they heard you talking in your sleep as well.”

Seiji couldn’t take any more of this. He crouched down, clutching his head in shame.

Shiroshi ruffled his hair. “Please don’t be discouraged. I’d assumed it would turn out that way.”

“Then why did you ask me to—?” Just as Seiji was starting to raise his voice, a thought hit him out of nowhere. “You didn’t—Did you send me outside for the night because you knew I was going to snore?” His voice was trembling with agitation, and Shiroshi quickly averted his gaze, staring vaguely off into the distance. He clearly had something on his conscience.

“You’re awful!”

Seiji was understandably upset, and Shiroshi began trying to calm him down.

When, just at that moment…

“Well, well. I see I’m not the first one here.”

Odoro had appeared. Looking at the pair, who were horsing around as if they weren’t at a murder scene, he raised a cynical eyebrow. “Am I interrupting?”

“No, not in the least,” Shiroshi said amiably, reaching out to shake his rival’s hand. He was taking advantage of the interruption to weasel out of this. “My apologies for the late introduction. I’m Shiroshi Saijou.”

“Ah yes. It’s not as if introductions were needed,” Odoro told him rather contemptuously, one corner of his lips curling. This guy was consistently irritating, but in a different way from Shiroshi.

His eyes slid to the side, stopping on the cage at their feet.

“…I see. So it was as I thought. The poor thing.”

Odoro’s hushed voice sounded so unexpectedly genuine that Seiji doubted his ears.

Kneeling on the tatami, Odoro reached toward the cage. The man picked up the tiger thrush, as if he were handling something very fragile, and snapped his fingers, and the bird's corpse vanished. It was just like a magic trick.

"I shall mourn it with due ceremony later. I assume you don't mind?"

"Of course not. That's a great help."

By the time Odoro rose smoothly to his feet, he was wearing his poker face again.

Then…

"Oh-ho. That's quite splendid," he said quietly. His eyes were on the kimono rack.

A moment later, his lips curved into a sardonic grin. "Peonies and a Chinese lion. The man was quite a wit. As a present for the wife he suspected of infidelity, that's irony of the highest order," he mused, talking to himself.

"Yes, well, most likely it was a reference to the 'worm in the lion,'" Shiroshi casually interjected.

Seiji seemed to be the only one who didn't know what that meant, so he opted to nod and look smug. It was his recently acquired "yes-man" mode.

"For the dead, there could be no greater humiliation—publicly declaring his wife a traitor even after killing her with his own two hands."

"W-wait a second. Suzuha killed herself, didn't she?"

"…Huh?" Seiji's dimwitted question drew a very dubious look from Odoro. The sort of reaction you'd give somebody who'd gotten *one plus one* wrong. "Is he all there in the head?"

"Please don't let it concern you. That's just Seiji for you."

Shiroshi's supportive comment didn't help at all, but then, his comments never did.

Odoro's lips curved mockingly. "I see. It appears the rumor was true."

"Oh? And what rumor might that be?"

"That you're keeping a human as a pet. Until now, I wasn't sure I believed it."

Apparently, everyone was talking about Seiji as if he were a pet. He genuinely felt like crying.

"Still, why him of all people? Imbecilic, ignorant, thoughtless, inconsequential, a nonentity. Putting it mildly, he appears to have the intelligence of a worm."

“Heh-heh. I happen to think the dumb ones are cuter.”

Seiji would honestly rather have heard Shiroshi attempt to deny it. Although, maybe there was no point denying a fact.

Out of nowhere, Odoro chuckled. There was something rather pointed about his laugh.

“I see. You’re just like your father there. After all, the man went out of his way to make his half-yokai son his heir.”

“Huh? Half-yokai?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? Your master was born from a human womb, just like you.” Addressing Shiroshi, he continued. “If I recall correctly, your mother was a prostitute, was she not?”

“…A geisha.”

Shiroshi had batted the question away easily, but there was a slight rigidity to his voice. This might be something he didn’t want to discuss. Feeling anger building inside him, Seiji surreptitiously glared at Odoro. Maybe he’d pitch a rock at him later…from a safe spot behind Shiroshi, of course.

“Maybe it’s that sense of kinship you share with humans that’s to blame, but I’m told the number of sinners you’ve sent to Hell hasn’t even reached five and twenty yet. Not to mention all the ones you’ve given an opportunity to atone.”

“My, how well-informed you are.”

Immediately, tremendous anger flared within Odoro’s eyes.

It was as if some horrible creature had crawled out from beneath the skin on his face, transforming the man’s symmetrical features into the hideous mask of a vengeful demon.

“I always knew your family wasn’t qualified to rule the demon realm.”

His voice chilled Seiji to the bone.

The next second, Odoro turned on his heel, starting toward the veranda. “Humans have always been foolish creatures—wretched, hideous, and above all, worthless. Not seeing that is what makes you and your father perennial failures.”

“You as well.” Shiroshi’s remark stopped Odoro in his tracks, although the man didn’t turn around. “I’ve heard the rumors. Brothers killing brothers…”

In an instant, the atmosphere turned menacing. As Odoro looked at Shiroshi over his shoulder, his eyes held an ominous sense of loathing. Malice, hostility, murderous intent— That one look was filled with them all.

But then…

“Yes, it is as you’ve heard.”

The moment he spoke, all those emotions evaporated as if they’d never existed.

“We both have troublesome fathers, don’t we?”

“Do not presume to compare us, baseborn wretch,” Odoro snapped before stalking off. Once he’d left, Shiroshi and Seiji were alone again.

“Um, Shiroshi?” Seiji started timidly. The boy didn’t look unsettled, but there was no way to tell what he was feeling. As Seiji floundered, trying to figure out what to say, Shiroshi spoke up.

“I’m told the Rindou Detective Agency was formerly run by a pair of twins.”

“Huh? So there’s another one of him out there?”

“No, not anymore.”

It sounded like there was more to it.

“Shinno Akugorou once had thirteen sons. Rumor has it that he determined his successor by making the brothers kill one another. Apparently that much is true.”

Shiroshi’s voice was quiet and had almost a sympathetic tone to it.

He let out a sigh. “Some do talk about it as he did, but personally, I’ve never been ashamed that human blood flows through my veins.” His smile looked normal at first glance, but there was a rare self-deprecating pall cast across it. “Still… Human, yet not quite human. Yokai, but not fully yokai… It’s true that I’m neither, so if others call me ‘incomplete,’ I guess I can’t really blame them.”

“But that’s not right,” Seiji interrupted, and Shiroshi gave him a blank look. “I mean, you’re half-human, half-demon, right? That doesn’t mean you’re neither; it means you’re both. Doesn’t it?”

Without warning, Shiroshi burst into laughter. For a little while, he just stood there laughing so hard his shoulders shook.

“Ah, no, I’m sorry. That was just so typically you.” The laughter had left tears in the corners of his eyes, and he was smiling the way he always did. “Heh-heh-heh. Actually, that’s how I think about it, too.”

“It just makes sense, right?”

“Absolutely.”

They nodded to each other, and Seiji realized that this was the first time they'd ever smiled over the same thing like this. "That way of thinking suits you better, Shiroshi."

"Heh-heh. Compliments will get you nothing but pocket money."

"That's plenty!"

Just then, they heard the unexpected sound of approaching footsteps.

"Excuse me. The mistress wants Master Akihito's clothes changed."

The newcomer was Mrs. Furuhashi, the housekeeper. She was a woman of about fifty with a round, plump face. The fact that they'd been ordered not to tamper with the crime scene was probably making her feel a little guilty about what she had to do; after giving them an apologetic explanation, she hurried over to the paulownia-wood chest of drawers.

As she was about to beat a hasty retreat, Shiroshi stopped her. "Mrs. Furuhashi, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"This haori was a gift from Akihito to Suzuha, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Do you know the meaning behind this 'peony and Chinese lion' motif?"

"Oh, um… The meaning…?" Mrs. Furuhashi hesitated, looking bewildered.

Shiroshi smiled at her. "It's said that Chinese lions sleep beneath peony blossoms because the dew that collects on the flowers kills an internal parasite that preys on them. There's a phrase that's linked to this idea: 'the worm in the lion.'"

"U-um, I'm sorry. I'm quite busy right now."

The woman gave a hasty bow and turned to go, but Shiroshi wasn't finished. "The parasite that feeds on the lion will eventually kill it, which is why this phrase is sometimes used to indicate a traitor who repays good with ill. Say, for example, an unfaithful wife who betrays her husband."

The woman quickly turned back toward Shiroshi. Her face was pale and clearly agitated, and fear filled her eyes. "Um, I—"

"I'm told that Suzuha was wearing this haori when she died. However, was she truly the one who chose it as her own burial shroud?"

Shiroshi took a step forward; he looked like a cat stalking a mouse. “No, of course not. Burns had clouded both her eyes. Blind as she was, Suzuha could never have taken the shears out of the sewing box.” He gave a gentle smile. “Which means that someone else must have slit her throat and draped the haori over her corpse. It was a message: ‘This woman is a traitor.’ You must have suspected it yourself.”

“F-forgive me!” Mrs. Furuhashi shrieked, bowing so low her head was almost touching the floor. “M-Master Akihito was the one who forced Miss Suzuha’s head into the brazier, but he never meant to kill her!”

She collapsed, sobbing. After waiting awhile for her to calm down, Shiroshi got the whole story out of the housekeeper.

From what she said…

One night, Mrs. Furuhashi had heard Suzuha scream. Running to the cottage, she’d found Akihito transformed into a raging demon, still wearing his haori as if he’d just returned from an outing. He’d grabbed the back of Suzuha’s head and was holding her face in the blazing coals of the brazier.

“Akihito!”

“M-Master Akihito, please, stop! What are you doing to Miss Suzuha?!”

Madam Tsuruko had also heard the uproar, and together they’d desperately torn Akihito away from his wife and isolated him in another room.

But it was already too late.

Suzuha’s face had become one big lump of charcoal, to the point where it didn’t even look human anymore. Somehow, even then, she was still breathing. Mrs. Furuhashi had tried to attend to her, but Tsuruko had sent her away, ordering her to return to her room.

Mrs. Furuhashi had waited impatiently for the ambulance, praying for Suzuha’s safety, but the flashing lights never arrived.

The next morning, she was told that Suzuha had died.

Having lost her senses the previous night, Suzuha had *tried to kill herself by burning her face in the brazier*. Tsuruko had been caring for her, but while her attention was elsewhere, the girl had taken the haori from the kimono rack, pulled it over her shoulders, and slit her own throat.

“Didn’t that story strike you as ridiculous?” Shiroshi asked her.

Hanging her head, Mrs. Furuhashi kept on repeating “Forgive me” over and over again.

“My elderly mother and an aged, bed-ridden relative live with me. If I’m forced to leave the mansion, we may no longer be able to stay in the village, and how on earth would we live, then?”

She had a point.

If the Shidou family insisted it had been a suicide, then that was what it was. No matter how loudly Mrs. Furuhashi proclaimed the truth, the police would never listen.

“Besides,” she went on, in a voice so faint it was barely audible, “I did think it might actually have been suicide.”

“Was there something that made you think so?”

“No, nothing specific. Just—”

She’d heard Suzuha sing.

As her flesh burned and blistered, the only thing to emerge from Suzuha’s lips had been moans of pain. But then, out of nowhere, she’d softly begun to sing.

“It sounded like a juggling song—the sort kids sing when they play with those little *otedama* beanbags.”

“Do you remember how it went?”

Mrs. Furuhashi knitted her brow, searching her memory. After a little while, she shook her head weakly. “I don’t know. Miss Suzuha learned many juggling songs from her grandmother, and she often sang them for Master Akihito. I believe it was one of them, but…”

“What about it made you think she might’ve committed suicide?”

“How should I put it…? When I heard the song, for some strange reason, it made me think of the haori.”

Which is why, when she’d heard about how Suzuha’s body had been found, a strange rationalization had crossed her mind.

“I had no idea it meant being a traitor. Miss Suzuha was delighted to receive that haori, and she was so enthusiastic about choosing a thank-you gift for her husband…”

Mrs. Furuhashi sniffled, pressing the hem of her apron to the corners of her eyes. “Miss Suzuha had a beautiful heart.” Tears welled up, and her lips quivered. “Master Akihito had quite the

temper when they first got married, and to be honest, I think that caused her a lot of painful memories. He gradually grew calmer, though, and I honestly believed they'd grow old and gray together, but sadly…"

Shiroshi set a comforting hand on Mrs. Furuhashi's shoulder. He seemed to be thinking hard.

"Could another man have been the father of Suzuha's child?"

Mrs. Furuhashi shook her head, biting back a sob. "I don't know, but I can't believe that Miss Suzuha would ever have…," she managed to get out before her throat closed up. She seemed to be on the verge of dissolving into tears.

Just then…

Shiroshi looked up, scanning the room as if he were searching for something. "What did Suzuha give Akihito in return?"

"That pen stand over there. It was originally a vase for flowers, but she suggested that it be kept on his writing desk."

A ceramic cylinder sat on the desk. The outside surface featured the image of a tiger hiding in a bamboo thicket, but the light, easy brushstrokes made it seem more friendly than fierce.

"It's Seto ware, isn't it? It appears to be an inexpensive piece, with no value as an antique. I would imagine she chose the tiger as a dig at Akihito. People called him a crazed beast."

Then she'd picked this gift to annoy him? What a depressing idea.

So Akihito had suspected his wife of infidelity, and Suzuha had also held a lot of pent-up ill will toward her husband. Nothing was more dismal than the thought of a couple constantly quarreling in this cramped birdcage of a cottage.

Hmm?

Unexpectedly, Seiji was struck by the feeling that something wasn't right. He blinked.

That's weird.

As he looked at the piece of pottery, he realized that something was missing.

"…Shiroshi? Isn't that sort of odd?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, uh, this tiger *isn't* scary."

That was it: There was nothing frightening about this tiger.

The *nue* was a chimera composed of the parts from a snake, tanuki, tiger, and monkey. The animal each member of the

Shidou family had turned into had most likely been determined by their individual temperaments.

When Seiji had first seen Akihito, the man's ominously fierce gaze had made him shudder. As Shiroshi had said, Akihito had been feared as a "crazed beast," and that ferocity was just what you'd expect from a wild tiger.

And yet…

The tiger painted on the pen stand was crouched there as if it was being protected by the bamboo grove. It even looked like it might have been dozing comfortably. All else aside, the design was too cute to give to somebody as an act of retaliation.

"Suzuha was sixteen, right? She was a high school kid. At that age, girls won't give someone they don't like a single individually wrapped chocolate, even if they're handing them out to everybody."

"It sounds like there's lived experience behind that comment."

"Uh, anyway, what I'm saying is that if the tiger Suzuha picked out shows how she saw Akihito…"

By now, even Seiji didn't know what he was trying to say. But somehow, in the process of venting about the weird, uncertain feeling he felt in his chest, he'd realized what it actually was.

Oh, that's it.

When he'd seen him through the gap in the cottage door, Akihito *hadn't* looked scary. The man's vacant, tiger-like eyes had held no hint of anger; he'd just been lying there all alone, and all Seiji had sensed in him was a dreary sadness.

"Was Akihito really just scary all the time?"

If he'd had a side that he could only show to his wife, couldn't this tiger be depicting that?

"…I see. 'Tiger and bamboo,' is it?" Shiroshi's eyes widened in surprise. Ignoring Seiji's bewilderment, he reached for the pen stand. "I may have drastically misinterpreted this."

"Huh?"

"Thank you, Seiji. You've brought something important to my attention." He began to search inside the stand. "My, what's this?"

He took out his hand to reveal a rather large key chain.

It was shaped like a pocket watch, and its glossy cloisonné dome was decorated with a cute cherry blossom design.

“I believe that’s Miss Suzuha’s. She was fond of cherry blossom accessories and liked to collect them.”

“I see.”

A *click* sounded from Shiroshi’s hands. Seiji looked over to see that the dome had opened up like the cover of a timepiece; apparently it was some kind of locket. A scrap of paper rested inside, folded up small.

“It does appear to have belonged to Suzuha,” Shiroshi said, unfolding the piece of paper. Looking down at it, his eyes seemed to be fighting back pain, then he returned the paper to the locket and tucked it into the front of his kimono. Apparently, this wasn’t the time to talk to him.

A pause, then…

“By the way, did the song sound anything like this?” Out of nowhere, Shiroshi began to sing an old children’s song.

Seiji didn’t recognize the lyrics, but the melody felt like someone gently bouncing a small ball. There was an air of poignant nostalgia about it, making the song sound rather lonely.

“Y-yes, that’s it! That’s the song!”

Mrs. Furuhashi had seemed stunned at first, but now she nodded emphatically.

“I see. All right.” Shiroshi returned her nod, then rose to his feet, beckoning Seiji to follow. “We’ll take our leave now. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone that I heard this from you.”

Giving her a reassuring smile, Shiroshi left the cottage.

❊

It happened a little while after they’d returned to the guest room.

Seiji was standing by the window, smoking to kill time, when Shiroshi made an odd request.

“Sorry, could you bend down a little?”

“Huh? Sure.” When Seiji did as he’d been asked, Shiroshi patted him on the head.

“U-uh…” Seiji wasn’t sure what to do with that.

For some reason, there was pity in Shiroshi’s eyes. He gave Seiji another reassuring smile. “I believe something quite unpleasant is about to happen to you, but it won’t last long. Please bear with it.”

“Huh?”

Almost immediately, the sliding door crashed open with enough force to shake the foundation.

“Move it! Out of my way!”

“Agh!”

It was Fumio. He charged in, shoved past Seiji, kicked Shiroshi’s luggage away from the door, then pounced on Seiji’s travel bag, which was lying by the alcove. It was a Boston bag identical to Shiroshi’s; Beniko had gotten it for him. Without asking permission, Fumio unzipped it and started rummaging through its contents.

“Wh-what are you—?!”

“Found it!” Fumio shouted. He was holding a short, fat ashtray with a lid. No— It was the Kinuta celadon incense burner from the cottage alcove. But what was it doing there?

“You’ll never talk your way out of this, you thieves!”

“Eegh?!”

“You two just stole this from the cottage! I was there right after you left, and it wasn’t in the alcove! The fact that it’s here is undeniable proof !”

“Huh?”

“That’s not all: You killed Akihito, didn’t you?! Don’t you dare run, murderer!”

“Urk?!”

The man had just picked a completely incomprehensible fight with him, leaving Seiji gaping like an oxygen-starved goldfish, when Odoro appeared, as composed as ever, walking stick in hand.

Seiji was so flustered he was almost crying as Fumio threatened him, shoulders squared. Watching them with the eyes of someone observing a fight between two stray dogs, Odoro shrugged. “This is how things stand.” He spoke in the indifferent, careless tone of a critic analyzing a badly written play. “An investigation of the garden turned up some undeniably suspicious sneaker prints. Their wearer seems to have been lurking in the bushes and watching the cottage last night. Only one person in this mansion wears sneakers: you.”

“Th-that was because, um, I was keeping an eye on the cottage.”

“Oh? And why was that?” the man asked, a nasty tone in his voice.

Seiji's words deserted him. He'd been watching the cottage to make sure nothing happened, of course, but saying as much would only make them suspect him more.

"Why don't I answer for you, then? When you two came here, you were after the Shidou family's antiques. The truth is that you are a pair of thieves masquerading as psychics."

"Wha—?!"

"Last night, you were lurking in the garden, casing the cottage. You intended to wait until its owner, Akihito, had left, then slip inside and appropriate his collection."

"Huh?!"

Shiroshi abruptly looked down, hiding his face. He had a hand over his mouth, and his shoulders were quivering. He couldn't be crying, could he? Just as Seiji was about to panic, he realized Shiroshi was desperately biting back laughter. How was he supposed to get out of this?!

"As lookout, you entered when Akihito stepped out to relieve himself. However, he returned sooner than you'd anticipated, and you were forced to take refuge in the closet. When you did so, you dropped this glove. Fumio found it there a few minutes ago."

Odoro was holding a very familiar woolen glove. When Seiji hastily searched through the pockets of his down jacket, he discovered that he was definitely missing one. "Wh-what…" … *was it doing in there?*

Odoro ignored Seiji's groan. "But it was only a matter of time before he found you hiding in the closet. After all, when Akihito decided to go to bed, he would have to open that very same closet to take out his bedding. So you—"

"Strangled the man with a cord he happened to have on him, then tried to make it look like a suicide?" Shiroshi broke his silence to finish Odoro's sentence for him. His laughing fit hadn't quite subsided yet; his voice trembled, and the pitch rose slightly at the end of his sentence. "Was it really necessary to go to the trouble of killing him, though? Making a stealthy escape would have been far more efficient."

"As you know, the veranda creaks dreadfully. He must have assumed he wouldn't be able to flee unnoticed. At the time, he hadn't realized that Akihito had removed his hearing aid."

"Hmm, I see."

“Everyone knew that Akihito had just returned from the clinic where he’d been convalescing. That must have been what made him think of staging a suicide by overdose. But the very next morning, we saw right through his ruse, at which point—”

“We made a second, successful attempt to steal the incense burner and were planning our getaway at this very moment, correct?” Shiroshi said, applauding lightly. He looked genuinely impressed. “I see. For an off-the-cuff performance, that’s quite entertaining.”

“…You flatter me.” Odoro’s expression was cold, but from the way his temples were spasming, Shiroshi’s attitude had riled him up quite a bit. Suddenly shedding his suit jacket, Odoro unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. “Now, allow me to see you out.”

No sooner had he spoken than, in a display of unexpected physical strength, he grabbed Seiji by the scruff of the neck and dragged him out of the room. Seiji wasn’t strong at the best of times, so he was unable to do anything.

Going downstairs and exiting through the front door, Odoro dragged Seiji in the opposite direction to the cottage. As soon as he reached a storehouse with thick earthen walls rendered in plaster, he tossed Seiji inside, along with Shiroshi, who’d sauntered after them.

“Now then, good day to you.”

The door closed, and they heard the lock click.

Then there was only darkness.

*

Rinko and her mother had finished consulting with their lawyer, and she was standing outside the gate to see him off when Mrs. Furuhashi ran up to her, flustered. Odoro Rindou had given the housekeeper an urgent message to deliver. Apparently, he wanted all the members of the Shidou family to gather in the cottage. Rinko would rather have ignored him, but if the man knew people in the Metropolitan Police Department, she couldn’t just brush him aside.

How infuriating.

Silently fuming with frustration, she made for the cottage, ignoring her growing unease. When her mother arrived late,

she was carrying a silk-wrapped bundle that nearly filled her arms.

Once they were all there, Fumio, looking extremely pleased with himself, began telling them what had happened. He spoke energetically, gesturing with his hands and body, as if he fancied himself a detective.

Incredibly, he said that Akihito's murderer had been that drab-looking assistant, Seiji Tohno. Not only that, but Shiroshi Saijou's claim of being psychic was a barefaced lie: He was a thief who'd approached her with the intent of stealing the mansion's antiques.

Ridiculous.

Rinko listened, feeling dreadfully unamused, but was startled to learn that the detective had vouched for all this. If Odoro Rindou—a man who was aloof and arrogant, for better or for worse—had made such claims, then it was likely to be true. However, the detective only stood silently by the window, apparently lost in thought.

"Is all this true, Mr. Rindou?" Rinko asked, growing impatient.

At that, a change came over Odoro. Tilting his handsome, alabaster face toward the floor, he made a noise deep in his throat. His shoulders began to tremble, and the noise grew more frequent.

What is this? Rinko frowned. Then it hit her:

He was laughing.

Laughing with pure amusement, as if this was the funniest thing in the world and he couldn't hold it in any longer.

Finally, he burst into loud peals of laughter. It was an ominous, dangerous laugh, the sort one might hear from the depths of Hell. He stared with eyes as wide as a beast's, pupils dilated, lips split in the grimace of a vengeful demon, looking like a complete madman. Tsuruko and Fumio both stared at him, dumbstruck.

"I beg your pardon," Odoro said curtly, setting his fedora back on his head.

Instantly, the insanity that had dominated the room evaporated. All that remained was a stifling silence, like the echo of a nightmare.

"Now that those two nuisances are out of the way, allow me to inform you of the true culprit behind Akihito's murder." His

words carried in a clear voice that could easily have belonged to an actor on the stage. “Just so you know, it wasn’t that pair of fools. The murderer is here with us, right at this very moment.”

“W-wait just a minute! What’s that supposed to mean?!” Fumio froze up, pale-faced, his eyes wide with shock. A moment later, he closed in on Odoro, speaking forcefully enough to send spittle flying. “The murderers are in the storehouse! You said so yourself just a few minutes ago!”

“Yes, I did. Disregard that, if you would.”

“Huh?!”

The detective’s casual, selfish request left Fumio open-mouthed and petrified.

And now…

Before a modest audience of three, the detective clapped his hands together, ordering silence.

“Your attention, please. The true culprit behind Akihito’s murder is—”

*

This was what it meant to be left speechless.

After being pitched into the dusty darkness by Odoro’s unexpected display of strength, Seiji scrambled for a spot under the skylight, then froze up. For a little while, he couldn’t even speak.

The inside of the gloomy storehouse was crowded with dust-covered trunks and dressers. Finding a convenient wicker storage chest, Shiroshi dusted it off and seated himself on it. From the way he immediately looked down, shoulders shaking, Seiji guessed he’d remembered the events of earlier and had started laughing again.

“Wh-wh-what was that…?” Seiji moaned.

Shiroshi shrugged lightly. “We appear to have been caught in a trap.”

“How can you be so calm about it?! And why are you still laughing?!”

“Oh, the idea of you as a thief in the night was just so incredibly—”

“That’s your reason?!” Seiji shouted, justifiably upset.

Hastily clearing his throat, Shiroshi gave him a placating smile. “Well, I had assumed he’d attempt something sooner or

later. Since the first of us to solve this will be crowned the victor, securing the right to make that move was key. That said, as you can imagine, I wasn't expecting him to accuse you of being a master thief."

He wasn't going to keep dragging that up, was he?

"Oh, right. Seiji, would you do me a favor?"

"…No."

"Do you see that mirrored dressing stand over there?" he said, ignoring Seiji's modest resistance in point zero seconds. Grudgingly, Seiji looked in the direction Shiroshi was pointing. There was a small dressing stand with a houndstooth-checked cloth covering its mirror, sitting on top of a paulownia-wood chest of drawers.

"This?"

"Yes. Remove the cover, if you would."

"…Uhh."

"Is something the matter?"

If he hesitated too long, Shiroshi would notice his discomfort. So, resigning himself to the inevitable, Seiji squeezed his eyes shut and yanked off the cover.

"We meet again."

"Bwaaaah!"

A baritone voice echoed from the mirror, making Seiji simultaneously scream and jump.

"M-my apologies. I didn't intend to startle you."

When he looked at the rectangular mirror, it held the reflection of Takamura Ono. Was this basically like a Skype video call? Maybe it would be a little easier on the heart if they had alerts that there was a call incoming…

"Hello there, Takamura." Shiroshi peeked in from behind Seiji, waving at the mirror.

"I'm glad to see you looking well, Master Shiroshi…but am I to infer that you have been trapped by Master Odoro?" Takamura's demeanor was as mild as always, but he wasn't pulling any punches.

"Yes, it certainly looks that way," Shiroshi told him lightly.

Takamura gave a little chuckle. *"At times like this, you really do resemble your father."*

"Do I? Personally, I think I take after my mother—"

"When you're plotting something, you look exactly like him."

That was a pretty evil grin.

“Heh-heh-heh. You shouldn’t say things like that. What will people think?” Shiroshi waved a hand in denial, smiling evasively.

Aha. Seiji thought he’d seemed too calm. There was more to this than met the eye, then.

“More importantly, how are things with Odoro?”

“Oh, yes. I thought I would show you as well, Master Shiroshi, so I brought the Mirror of Retribution. I’ll cast the image onto this mirror; wait just a moment.”

It really was all-purpose.

Almost immediately, the image changed to show the inside of the cottage. The detective seemed to be gearing up to present his findings: The cottage had been the scene of both incidents, and all the members of the Shidou family were present.

But why was the only thing they could hear loud laughter?

“…Simply laughing isn’t going to get him anywhere.”

“Uh, do you think whacking this would fix it? Like with an old TV?”

While the two of them talked like they were watching a show in the comfort of their own home, the detective in the mirror finally began to reveal the truth of the case.

But…

What was this “true culprit” business?

“So he didn’t actually think I did it?” Seiji asked, rather surprised.

“No, Odoro knew what was going on, of course. He chose to go along with the farce, knowing that he was falsely accusing you of the crime.” Shiroshi nodded, as if this was only to be expected. Considering that his full attention was on Seiji, he already seemed to be getting tired of watching.

“Then the real murderer tried to set me up to take the fall.” At that point, a certain possibility occurred to Seiji. “Uh, this is you we’re talking about, so I’m pretty sure I know the answer, but do you…?”

“Yes, naturally, I know who it is. After all, I’m me.” Chuckling, Shiroshi gave a brisk nod.

Oh, he does, does he? How about that.

“The culprit is Fumio,” Shiroshi told him with a simplicity that was almost startling. *Fumio* had raised a hand against the person in charge of the house? The man was a disgrace to all NEET-kind.

Now we come to the all-important proof…

“He provided the first piece this morning, when Akihito’s corpse was found.”

Seiji found himself feeling sorry for Fumio. He’d been busted way too fast.

“When one is informed of a suicide in the family, the ordinary response is to race to the scene. After all, they would have no idea as to the condition of the body, and it may be possible to revive them. However, before making for the cottage, Fumio contacted the doctor and the police.”

Now that Shiroshi pointed it out, that had been extremely suspicious.

“He must have put the incense burner in your bag while everyone else was in the cottage. In fact, I’d plucked a pine needle from the garden and wedged it between the sliding door and doorframe of our room so that I would know if anyone entered in our absence, and it was lying in the corridor when we returned.”

“T-tell me when you do stuff like that,” Seiji protested weakly.

The exchange he’d shared with Shiroshi earlier came back to him.

“Something smells here.”

“You mean resin? From the pine needle?”

“Heh-heh. No, not like that. Anyway, for now, let’s wait and see what they do.”

In other words, at that point, Shiroshi already knew they’d had an intruder.

“In the first place, I believe Fumio intentionally left the door of the cottage open slightly. He set it up so that you would be the first to discover the body. Then, when you and I went back there together, we’d leave our room unoccupied. No doubt he took that opportunity to plant the incense burner.”

Hearing it spelled out like that made Seiji seem like a real idiot. No, he was an idiot, period.

“The second piece of evidence was when he found the incense burner in your bag. When Fumio ran into our room, he ignored my bag, even though it was closer, and lunged straight at yours… Which is even more peculiar considering our bags look identical. That was quite strange, don’t you think?”

Actually, yes, it had been.

At this point, Fumio seemed so suspicious that he might as well have been declaring *I did it*. It was curious that Seiji hadn't noticed all this until after it was pointed out to him.

"Huh? Come to think of it, he claimed he'd found my glove in the closet."

"Yes, he must have stolen that from you beforehand. Remember when he ran into you in the cottage this morning? He gave you quite a shove with his shoulder."

"Oh!"

No way. He'd stolen it then?

When he'd taken off his gloves, he'd shoved them both into the pocket of his down jacket. They'd been hanging out a bit, so maybe that had made them easy to snag, but even so, this guy had some pretty impressive skills. Maybe Fumio was the one who had what it took to become a master thief.

"Hmm? Hang on a second." That last thought had made Seiji rethink the recent uproar, and something about it struck him as strange. "You said Fumio stole the incense burner from the cottage alcove this morning, slipped into our room after we'd gone out, and hid it in my bag. Right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"But that's impossible. We both saw it in the cottage right after that. If it happened the way you described, shouldn't the alcove have been empty?"

"Well done picking up on that, considering this is *you* we're talking about," Shiroshi told him, applauding in genuine admiration. He looked like the overly effusive owner of some dumb dog who'd finally managed to sit on command.

"You see, the incense burner in the cottage was…"

❊

"The incense burner in the cottage was a glaring counterfeit," Odoro Rindou told them, adding the final finishing touches to his deduction. Watching him work in that old-fashioned suit, he looked like a true master detective to Rinko.

"The first thing that struck me as odd was the burner's placement. When incense burners have three legs, as this one does, it's customary to have a single leg facing forward. This morning, however, it had been completely turned around. It's hard to believe that a man as fond of antiques as Akihito would

make such an error, so it only seemed appropriate to assume that this was someone else's doing. Then, upon closer inspection…" Pausing, Odoro smiled faintly—not a wry smile, this time, so much as a strained grin holding back a laugh. "It was immediately obvious that it was a fake. Even as a copy, it's a failure. Practically worthless junk."

"Wha—?!" Fumio cried out. His mouth hung open, all sound cut off.

"Celadon has long been notorious for its clever counterfeits. Among them, a single successful piece of imitation Kinuta celadon can bring in a fortune, so counterfeiters work as if their lives hang in the balance. However, the craftsmanship on that incense burner was far too shoddy to have deceived a collector as sharp-eyed as Akihito."

"Th-that can't be!"

"It's a cheap fake, most likely made not too long ago. What's more, it's not even celadon; just a pale imitation that has a similar texture. Were it to be sold at a souvenir shop, it would cost two or three thousand yen at most. So if someone purchased that from an antique shop for several hundred thousand yen, the merchant must have considered them a far easier mark than their regular clientele—"

"D-don't give me that! I bought it for one and a half million yen from a dealer with an eye for this type of pottery! He said it was the deal of the century!"

"Oh? I don't believe I ever said it was yours."

"Ghk!" Fumio choked and fell silent, looking like an animal who'd stumbled into a trap.

Gazing at the man with disdain, Odoro gave a small, contemptuous smile. "In all likelihood, immediately after Akihito's body was discovered and the first person on the scene had left the room, you took the opportunity to switch the incense burner with your own counterfeit. Then, once the guest room was empty, you slipped the stolen burner into their luggage. At which point, the identity of Akihito's murderer would seem self-evident."

"You've got no proof ! You can't prove the burners were switched, either! You can't even prove that's mine!" The man's desperate scream quivered, and his voice cracked.

Odoro immediately fired back. "There is proof. It's behind you at this very moment."

“Huh?”

He snapped his fingers.

The door slid open, and Mrs. Furuhashi appeared, looking bewildered. In her hands she held a cedarwood box inscribed with the year it had been made. Odoro must have given her instructions earlier.

The moment Fumio saw it, his lips began to tremble. “I-it can’t be…”

“Yes, this is an item from your collection, brought from your room. No doubt you know what’s inside.”

The object that appeared from the box was a Kinuta celadon *hakamagoshi* incense burner that looked exactly like the one in the alcove.

Or rather, a forgery of it.

“It should be around… Ah, there it is.” Reaching for the burner’s dome-shaped silver lid, Odoro pulled a slender thread from a gap in the metalwork. It looked like a single strand of light-colored hair.

“This morning, I put one of my own hairs into the incense burner *that was in the cottage alcove*. The fact that I’ve found it here is incontrovertible proof that they were switched, is it not?”

Completely backed into a corner, Fumio slid down to sit on the tatami.

Right at that moment…

“Mr. Rindou.”

It was the mother, Tsuruko.

“You don’t suppose you could end the investigation there, do you?”

As she spoke, Tsuruko held out a mound of bundled bills that had emerged from the silk wrapping cloth. There were two substantial stacks; there had to be at least ten million yen there.

“Oh-ho. You’ve outdone yourself.”

“As the price of my family’s honor, it’s a mere trifle. Please accept it.”

She spoke in a matter-of-fact way, her profile as expressionless as stone. Fumio, meanwhile, was clearly shaken. His pale lips quivered. “B-but, Mom, that’s…”

“Don’t you dare call me ‘Mom.’ It’s nauseating.” The hatred in her rejection drained any remaining color from Fumio’s face. Tsuruko looked away, disgusted. “The former head of this

family fathered you with a geisha. I might have adopted you in order to avoid a scandal, but I have never considered you worthy of my love. My only children are Akihito and Rinko."

Her eyes held all the fury of a mother whose son had been killed.

Dumbstruck, Fumio backed away. He shook his head, like a little boy throwing a tantrum. "Then— Then why did I—?! I was just trying to protect this family!"

"The family?" Rinko echoed. She gave a scornful little chuckle. "You were protecting yourself. Any note that girl left would obviously have been an apology to her husband. You thought she'd named you as the father of her child. That's why you attacked Akihito."

Her mockery cast a dark pall over Fumio's face. "No!" he shouted, shaking his head as if he'd lost his mind. "There was no note! I checked the stationery box, the desk drawers, the closet— I searched every corner of this cottage! He made up the note to trap me. I—I didn't mean to do it; Akihito made me kill him!"

"In fact, you've just hit the nail on the head," Odoro agreed unexpectedly. "No doubt Akihito intended to be killed all along; there were no self-inflicted scratch marks on his neck indicating a struggle. Having despaired of life, and in order to vent his resentment and anger, I believe he resolved to use his own death to destroy the Shidou family." Odoro's impassive voice almost seemed to hold a touch of admiration. "He knew that if he brought up the incident with his wife again after so long, it was likely to be dismissed as a lunatic's delusion, which is no doubt why he brought in a detective. Then, to induce you to commit murder, he fabricated the existence of a note. In a way, one could say that he indirectly forced the family to commit murder-suicide."

What the man was describing was so selfish that Rinko cursed in spite of herself. "What an outrageous nuisance. Men are all so self-centered."

"Oh? But weren't you the one who instigated this affair?"

Rinko looked up in shock, to see a single piece of paper in front of her face. It had a simple design: ruled lines on a plain white background. From the creasing, it had been folded up quite small. It showed one line of text in poor, clearly disguised handwriting:

Only the husband doesn't know who the father of her child is.

"I found this in the stationery box a short while ago. This anonymous report is most likely what precipitated the violence. One could call it an incitement to murder. After all, it was obvious that if Akihito saw this, his anger would cause him to lose his mind." Then, with a cold glance at Rinko: "You were the one who sent this, weren't you?"

"From what I can tell, it appears to be anonymous. Why do you suggest it's mine?"

"Because, if I do this, your signature appears. Look."

Before Rinko had the chance to utter an objection, Odoro held the stationery up to the ceiling light. Instantly, a crest consisting of a stylized wreath of flowers appeared on what had seemed to be plain white paper.

"A wreath of white lilies: the school emblem of St. Catherine's Academy for Girls. However, I'm told the design is so subtle that some students purchase it without realizing it features the school's crest, as you did."

Realizing she wouldn't be able to talk her way out of this, Rinko slumped. She didn't want to make disgraceful excuses, as her brother had done. "I did it to protect the Shidou family."

"By making a murderer of the head of the family?"

"This isn't the sort of family that would be unsettled by the killing of one filthy pregnant woman. If it meant my brother would have to step down from his position as head of the family, so much the better. It would have been different before, but once he was damaged, placing the family's fortunes on his shoulders was a self-destructive act." Rinko gave a thin smile. "The accident left my brother unable to bed a woman, so the very fact that she was pregnant was proof of that woman's infidelity. Not to mention the father was that good-for-nothing." She glanced at Fumio out of the corner of her eye. "If she was growing the seed of misfortune in her womb, surely plucking it promptly was the appropriate thing to do."

"…As the family's rightful heir, you mean?"

"Yes. It's quite clear who should inherit the Shidou family by now, don't you think?"

This was what Rinko had always wanted to say.

Her mother had always doted on her firstborn son and refused to listen to her.

"Even if you've killed two people?"

“Yes, since they were the ‘worm in the lion’ and its spawn. Or rather…” Rinko gave a stifled chuckle. “Perhaps I should call her a lecherous traitor.”

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Furious, Fumio scrambled to his feet. He seemed eager to play the knight in shining armor. “Suzuha was sent to us as collateral for a loan, and she was practically acting as a human sacrifice marrying into our family. She spent her days living in fear, caged with a beast, and the person she clung to was me—that’s all. No one has any right to insult her for that!”

Odoro’s response was chilly. “And yet, you were the one who slit her throat.”

“Th-that’s ridiculous!”

“Oh-ho. Judging by your reaction, it appears I hit the nail on the head. It’s clear now why you had to kill Akihito last night: As the perpetrator of that crime two years ago, you had to prevent the police from reopening the case, no matter what it took. No doubt you acted on Madam Tsuruko’s orders, but still I’m amazed you can speak so brazenly with her blood on your hands,” Odoro said derisively.

“Y-you don’t know a thing!” Fumio’s cheeks flushed crimson. “There was no way she could have survived with those burns. Putting her out of her misery as quickly as possible was the merciful thing to do. Otherwise, how could I have killed my own child?!”

“Well, well. You knew about the child?”

“Not at the time. If I had, I would’ve given up everything to be with her. I’m sure she knew that, though, which is why she couldn’t bring herself to tell me.”

Fumio sank to his knees like a wilting plant. Sniffling melodramatically, he went on in a voice damp with tears. “I didn’t kill Akihito to save my own skin. I was avenging them—the woman who was mauled to death by that tiger and the child she carried.” He pounded the floor with his fist. “As if I’d ever regret that!”

Followed immediately by…

“In that case, you may go to Hell with a clear conscience.”

Odoro’s eyes were cold. He thumped the end of his walking stick on the tatami.

Out of nowhere, the corpse of a bird appeared. Its tawny feathers had a scaly black pattern on them; it was a species

Rinko had only ever seen in illustrated guides. What had it been called? A tiger thrush?

In the blink of an eye, the bird transformed into a monstrous beast the size of a lion. A tiger? No. The muscular limbs it planted on the tatami flooring did seem to have a tiger's characteristic stripes; however, its lashing tail ended in a snake's head, poised to strike, and the fur on its body looked like a tanuki's.

And most of all—

"EEEEEK! EEEEEK!"

With the face of a snarling monkey, it gave a howl that was both shriller and more jarring than a woman's scream.

Was this a *nue*?

"Go."

Odoro's voice lashed out like a whip.

The monster's back arched like a bow, then it leaped, jaws open wide, straight at Fumio's frozen form.

In a flash…

The monkey's fangs ripped through his throat, sending up a spray of bright blood, and Rinko felt her consciousness fade before the horrifying spectacle.

✻

Seiji had forgotten all about the mirror as he listened intently to Shiroshi's explanation.

"Huh? It's getting kind of noisy over there."

Just as he'd started to wonder what was going on, Shiroshi fell silent. His eyes came to rest on a thick set of plaster-coated double doors. "It shouldn't be long now," he murmured.

It almost sounded like a prophecy.

The next moment, they heard a *click*, and light split the darkness. With a heavy creak, the storehouse doors swung open.

"Are you all right?"

Incredibly, the figure that appeared was Beniko. She was staring at her master with those large black eyes, looking exactly as she had when she'd left them in front of the Shidou residence the day before.

"Yes, I'm doing splendidly. And you, Beniko—excellent work. Camping overnight must have been quite trying for a fish, even

if you were in the car.”

“I’m fine; it was only the one night.”

Seiji’s mouth was hanging open; he couldn’t seem to process any of this.

When he looked closer, he noticed a pair of obviously expensive binoculars hanging around Beniko’s neck. So after she’d dropped them off at the Shidou family’s front gate, Beniko must have only pretended to start back home and had instead found a hiding place close by from where she’d been keeping an eye on the two of them like a ninja.

Hang on, that other stuff could wait. Hadn’t he just heard something he really should comment on?

“Uh, is Beniko—?”

“Well, shall we be going?”

Smoothly ignoring Seiji, Shiroshi made for the door. He looked like a stage actor stepping out from the wings into the spotlight. A familiar poem flowed easily off his tongue:

“Call everyone here,”
says the master detective,
and so it begins.

“Just any ordinary detective won’t cut it with this case, however. Without a *master* detective, we can’t even begin to get started.”

Glancing over his shoulder at Seiji, Shiroshi gave a mischievous smile. “Now then, it’s time for the headliner to take the stage.”

*

It was a bloodbath. There was no other word for it.

When Seiji and Shiroshi reached the cottage, they were met by the choking stench of blood and the towering, ferocious figure of the *nue*. The monkey’s muzzle was hideously wrinkled, but the individual in its jaws wasn’t a member of the Shidou family. For some reason, it had buried its fangs in the throat of its master, Odoro, and had pinned his chest to the ground.

“Gak!”

Sharp tiger claws sank deeper into his breastbone. One of Odoro’s broken ribs had apparently pierced a lung, and he coughed up dark red blood. If he’d been human, he would have been dead ages ago.

“Wh…? Why? Inconceivable…,” he muttered. He sounded delirious, and the words left his lips on a gout of bloody foam.

Shiroshi clapped his hands once, sharply, and the *nue* disappeared, puffed out like a candle’s flame.

“Didn’t you know?” Kneeling on the tatami, Shiroshi looked down into Odoro’s face. There was a thin smile on his lips. “You had the culprit right; it’s definitely Fumio. However, you failed to reveal his sin in its entirety. If there is an error in the crime with which the criminal is charged, any and all punishment is transferred onto the arbiter.”

“It…can’t be… What did I…?”

“That is precisely what I’m about to explain.”

Rising to his feet, Shiroshi turned sharp eyes on the members of the Shidou family.

Having escaped with his life at the last moment, Fumio was shaking, paralyzed with fear. Madam Tsuruko was sitting beside him, protectively hugging the unconscious Rinko to her. Fortunately enough, Mrs. Furuhashi seemed to have fainted as well. It was best not having to witness the affairs of Hell.

“Two years ago, as Suzuha lay dying, she sang a children’s song to herself. Do you remember how it went?” Quietly, Shiroshi began to sing a tranquil melody. It was the same song he’d sung for Mrs. Furuhashi a short while earlier.

Peony and Chinese lion, bamboo and tiger
The tiger, for young Watounai
Lord Naitou, the trailing wisteria

The nostalgic rhythm stirred feelings of homesickness and seemed rather lonely.

“It’s a juggling song that was popular from the end of the Tokugawa shogunate and into the Meiji era. It was probably one of the songs Suzuha learned from her grandmother, and in singing it, she was attempting to provide us with a hint as to what happened.”

Shiroshi’s eyes went to the pen stand on the writing desk. Or rather, to the color painting of the bamboo grove and tiger on its surface.

“Akihito’s present to Suzuha was the ‘peony and Chinese lion.’ Suzuha’s gift to him in return was the ‘bamboo and tiger.’

Both are connected to this song. And the message Suzuha tried to pass on through this song was—”

As he spoke, Shiroshi took the cloisonné key chain out of his kimono.

With a *click*, the lid opened. He unfolded the scrap of paper inside it, revealing characters written with a fountain pen. The gentle, rounded hand looked as if it belonged to a young woman, yet the writing was shaky in places, as if the writer had been agitated.

“That’s right: Suzuha *did* in fact leave a note. Having anticipated her own death, she put the note inside this key chain and hid it in the pen stand. Then, in her last moments, she softly sang this tune to convey its location. She believed Akihito would catch on, even if no one else did.”

He ran his fingertip gently over the paper, in a gesture very similar to the way he’d stroked the tiger thrush’s corpse.

“Akihito probably realized what the song meant during his period of convalescence at the clinic, which is why the first thing he did when he returned was open up the cottage. That was when he found this note, which is what precipitated this incident.”

Then, calmly, Shiroshi started to read aloud.

If you are reading this letter, then I’m probably no longer among the living.

That one sentence was the entirety of the opening paragraph.

Just earlier, Miss Rinko came up to me and whispered in my ear, “The tiger knows.” As you were getting ready to go out, I saw her slip a knotted letter into the sleeve of your haori, so I assume this to be a written accusation against me.

When you return tonight, Master Akihito, I’ve resolved myself to tell you everything. However, in case I lose my life without being given a chance to explain, I’ve left this letter.

According to the letter—

The tragedy had all begun with the cat, Mikeko. Its owner had neglected it for so long that it had grown sickly, so Suzuha had begun to diligently look after it. Doing so had put her in

contact with Fumio, who was, in name if not anything else, the cat's owner. They began conversing, and before long, he confessed his feelings for her.

After that, Suzuha had taken care to avoid him. But one night, Fumio had called her to his room, saying that the cat seemed unwell, and raped her, then blackmailed Suzuha into continuing this "arrangement." Akihito lost all sense of reason when he was angry, so if he found out what had happened, he would have done something that there was no coming back from. That fear kept Suzuha from confiding in anyone, and while she was still trying to figure out what to do, she fell pregnant.

My only wish is for you to keep on living. Please, please find a way to be happy. The cherry blossom buds you gave me when I was a child bloomed more beautifully than any dream. Thank you. You have made me the happiest woman alive. So please, even if you kill me, make sure you find happiness in the end.

The letter closed with those trembling words.

"Both you and I, as well as all the members of the Shidou family, misinterpreted the meaning of this haori. Thinking it signified a traitor who'd 'repaid kindness with evil' was a grave mistake: To Akihito, it represented the place where his heart could rest."

Shiroshi's eyes went to the kimono rack. To the Chinese lion reclining beneath dew-covered peonies.

"Anger, emptiness, despair… These feelings raged inside him uncontrollably. They were the 'worms in the lion' that was Akihito: a crazed beast, who only ever felt at peace with Suzuha. That is the true meaning of the haori."

Next, Shiroshi looked at the picture on the pen stand: the solitary tiger, relaxing in the embrace of the bamboo thicket.

"This is true of Suzuha's reciprocal gift as well. Bamboo thickets allow tigers to escape from the elephant, its natural enemy, which is why they have long been considered a safe haven for tigers. In this way, Suzuha was saying that *her* heart rested with Akihito."

He looked down at Odoro, who lay in that miserable state at his feet.

“Do you see now? People’s hearts are how accidents like these happen. To judge their sins, first you must understand their hearts. You only act as if you do, and your arrogance is what makes it possible to trip you up like that.”

He gave a faint smile.

Beautiful yet ominous, it was the wicked grin of a demonic god.

“Next time you try bluffing, I recommend choosing your opponent more wisely. Perhaps you aren’t capable of that, though. As the old saying goes, ‘The weaker the dog, the louder it barks.’”

The next second…

One moment, Odoro had been groaning in agony, and the next, his face had twisted into a hideous expression. His crazed golden eyes glared at Shiroshi as he cursed him.

“I’ll kill you,” he spat. The words carried such a stench of blood that Seiji’s hair stood on end.

“Feel free to try. I’ll be waiting for you,” Shiroshi said coolly. As if indicating he had no more business with the man, he turned his back on Odoro to face the members of the Shidou family. Two eyes, the color of darkness itself, came to rest on Fumio.

“‘Vengeance,’ you say? Don’t make me laugh. You threatened, raped, and impregnated a woman, then killed her to protect yourself.”

“Ah, ah!” The man’s voice was just an inarticulate gasp.

Shiroshi took a step forward, his eyes fixed on the Hell-bound sinner. “In Japanese, we write ‘Hell’ using a character whose components roughly translate to ‘Where beasts and dogs hold power.’ It’s a place into which those who are even lower than beasts fall, and in that regard, this house is most certainly Hell itself.”

He took another step forward.

“The monkey rapes, the snake incites, the tiger devours, and the tanuki deceives. Together, the four of you are one monster: the *nue*.”

Looking like a white demon, Shiroshi gave a mocking smile.

Then…

With a rustle, money fluttered through the air. Holding her beloved daughter close, teeth bared like an animal, Madam Tsuruko had snatched up a stack of bills and flung them at

Shiroshi. “Stay back, you monster!” she shrieked. Her face filled with maternal rage, as if she was trying to save all of them, even her stepson, from the demon that loomed before them.

“…Mom.” A sob escaped Fumio. It was the second time he’d called her by that name, and this time Tsuruko didn’t deny it.

All of a sudden…

A smile like a white peony bloomed on Shiroshi’s lips.

“Now then, to Hell you shall go.”

He clapped his hands once, sharply.

With a light *thump*, a cat landed on the tatami next to him. It was Mikeko.

Shiroshi’s pale palm stroked its back, and the old cat immediately transformed into a monstrous feline the size of a lion, roaring and arching its back high.

Was that a roar of triumph, of laughter, or of grief?

“It’s called a *kasha*. In ancient times, the word referred to the blazing carriage that carried sinners to Hell, but over time, people started to use it to describe a cat that had lived long enough to become a monster. You see, they devour sinners alive, just like this.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than the *kasha* lunged at mother and daughter like a ferocious tiger, gnashing them in its jaws. However, in the blink of an eye, the spattered flesh and blood vanished like smoke, and only two corpses lay there, as pallid as wax dolls.

“Ee— Eeeeeeek!”

With a cry that was somewhere between a scream and a sob, Fumio tried to crawl away.

Leaping again, the *kasha* pounced on him, planting a paw on his back and pinning him down like a cat trapping a mouse, before its enormous leonine mouth bit off the man’s thrashing legs.

A scream.

It sounded like the man’s last dying shriek but quickly turned into a moan of agony. His legs, which had been bitten off by the *kasha* only a second ago, were still attached, and there wasn’t a scratch on them.

Or so it seemed.

“S-spare me… M-my legs…”

Before their very eyes, the two legs protruding from the hem of Fumio's indecently rucked-up kimono turned livid. The skin ruptured, oozing bloody pus, and swarms of wriggling maggots began to appear from beneath the flesh.

"EEK! EEEEEE…!"

Panicking, Fumio tried to swat away the surging maggots with both hands, but despite his attempts, the grubs continued their meal.

He was being devoured alive.

"Uhk…"

Feeling an uncontrollable surge of nausea, Seiji fell to his knees and vomited up bile from his stomach.

This is Hell.

Hell really was on earth in this place.

The shouts for help turned into despairing sobs and, finally, silence. Nothing in the room was moving anymore. At some point, Odoro had vanished, leaving behind a pool of dark blood.

Thus, the duel between two yokai came to a close, leaving Shiroshi the sole victor.

Even in the midst of agonized screams and the stench of blood and death, Shiroshi had remained as pure and unblemished as ever, and after a little while, his face creased into the gentle smile of a Buddhist saint.

"Well then, shall we go home, Seiji?"

That's when it happened.

Unable to either take that hand or smack it away and run, Seiji hit his limit. He crumpled, blacking out.

And so, at long last, the night of the *nue*'s cry came to an end.

*

She was dreaming. In the dream, she was six years old again.

Her father had been an unemployed alcoholic at the time, and he'd gone to the Shidou mansion to ask for a loan, tugging Suzuha by the hand. He'd probably taken her along in the hope that a young child might win their sympathy. She knew full well that if they turned him down, he'd curse her for being useless and hit her.

It was spring.

Suzuha had been bundled away to a room deep in the manor, and while she sat there waiting for her father and making herself as small as possible, she suddenly started wanting to see her mother. Her kind mother had died in a traffic accident when Suzuha was just starting preschool, which was when her father had started drinking his days away.

Oh, of course. If I die, I can go where Mom is.

Feeling as if she were in a dream, Suzuha crossed the dark, lustrous corridor, making for the front entrance. If she'd managed to leave the mansion, she might have jumped from the bridge into the river without even realizing she was trying to kill herself.

But then…

"Are you Mr. Kurahashi's daughter?"

Someone had called out to her, and when she turned, she saw a tall, slender young man. His gentle features still seemed rather boyish, yet the way he behaved was almost too mature, as if old beyond his years.

"The cherry tree in the front garden is blooming. Shall we go take a look?" The young man gave her a kind smile.

Nodding soberly, Suzuha took the hand he held out to her.

Now that she thought about it, in that moment, she'd been rescued from the jaws of death.

The young man and Suzuha stood in front of a cherry tree in full bloom.

Plucking a blossom-laden branch from the tree, he held it out in front of her as if it were something very fragile. "Cherry trees don't bloom just because spring comes. Their buds won't open unless they're exposed to low temperatures in the dead of winter. The colder it gets, the more beautifully they bloom, just like this."

He spoke like a teacher, and Suzuha listened, eyes lowered.

For some reason, her fingertips were trembling, and she couldn't make them stop. It wasn't cold at all, but she felt like she was freezing. Maybe she finally realized she'd been trying to die.

Noticing that she was trembling, the young man squeezed her hand. "It's all right. Girls like you are made to find happiness. So I want you to keep believing in this world until you do."

The hand that squeezed hers was warm, like the very warmth of spring that made the buds of the cherry tree open.

Finally, a sob slipped through Suzuha's gritted teeth, and she began to wail. The young man stood beside her the whole time, staying with her until she stopped crying. He held her hand tightly, as if trying to encourage her.

Time passed…

Her father got work at a factory run by the Shidou family, and their lives took a turn for the better. Suzuha would later learn that the family's oldest son, who had been in high school at the time, had intervened to make it happen.

She also learned that the boy had an interest in antiques, that his friends teased him by calling him "Young Grandpa" because he acted so mature, and that his name was Akihito Shidou.

Then, one day, a tragic accident turned him into someone else entirely, reducing him to a wild beast. When Suzuha was sent to be his wife, she was nothing more than a sacrifice, offered up as collateral for a loan.

But…

Would people laugh and call her a fool for sacrificing her life all for the sake of a moment's memory, something only she remembered anymore? Even so, her feelings wouldn't change.

I'd become anything, even a demon, if that's what it took to stay by his side.

Then, one day…

Suzuha woke from her dream with the strange feeling that someone had been calling out for her.

It was a quiet night. The cottage felt like a tiny island floating in the darkness, the only thing left in the world.

"…Suzuha, I'm sorry."

The speaker was right next to her. He was crying, choking back sobs as he stroked her broken, bandaged fingers.

It was her husband, Akihito.

Apologizing again and again, as if the words were being wrung from deep within his guts, he caressed the fingers that had been hurt by his own violence. "I'm so sorry. I couldn't make you happy. I deserve to go to Hell."

The joy she felt in that moment was beyond words.

He remembered, she thought.

Oh, I'm so glad I didn't die.

I'm glad that, when I wake up, he's the person who'll be by my side.

I'm glad you saved my life.

I'm glad I was born for you, that I lived for you.

"I'm the happiest woman in the world," Suzuha whispered, and she truly meant it.

She squeezed the hand that had saved her as a child, as if she was returning the favor.

"If you're going somewhere, I'll go with you. Even to Hell itself. So please, keep holding my hand."

Hot tears spilled from her downcast eyes, falling onto their clasped fingers.

If the tears she shed became the dew on the peonies, then she'd cry beside this man as often as it took. She prayed that, if such a thing was possible, they would be tears of joy.

As long as I have the warmth of this hand, I know I'll be happy.

Even if we're in Hell.

Mystery 2 – The End

MYSTERY 3
ITSUMADE, OR EPILOGUE

Spring had arrived.

Seiji had opened a window for ventilation, and a sweet, brisk wind blew in. At some point, the blossoms on the sacred anise tree had opened all the way.

The buds had all unfurled at once, as if announcing the advent of spring, and now the tree was covered in clusters of little white flowers that sent their light fragrance drifting through the house.

It sort of reminds me of somebody…

Seiji was standing by the study window, absently toying with a cigarette. Unusually, Shiroshi wasn't there, so he'd decided to take the opportunity to smoke, then realized he didn't have his lighter on him.

The sacred anise tree was lethally poisonous, yet apparently its fragrance had the power to repel evil. It really did have both good and evil in its nature.

Oh, right.

Those blossoms were almost too white, and they'd handed Seiji the name of that "somebody."

Shiroshi.

When it came down to it, a person's experience in Hell probably depended on the *oni* they were dealing with. He'd been living here as Shiroshi's assistant-slash-freeloader for three months now, and even though he'd seen some pretty gruesome hells, time in this house still passed as peacefully as ever.

It had been a month since the fall of the Shidou family. Before long, even that blood-smeared, maggot-ridden memory had been driven away by the aroma of freshly baked apple pie and the sense of well-being that three meals a day brought. That

is to say, familiarity is a frightening thing, and life went on regardless.

Even if Hell was right below the floorboards.

“Nh… Huh? Beniko?”

Sensing someone close by, Seiji looked up and made eye contact with Beniko, who’d apparently come to close the window. At some point, he’d sat down at the nearby table, propped his chin on his hand, and dozed off.

“I’m very sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

She was perfectly polite, but her face was as blank as an iron mask. Like her master, Shiroshi, she was a bit of an enigma.

“Did you intend to smoke?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.”

Beniko promptly reached out and took the cigarette from his hand.

“Have these instead.”

“Th-thanks.”

She’d given him a couple of dried squid legs.

Apparently this was part of a “no smoking” campaign. He’d thought he was being careful about keeping the rooms aired out, but maybe the smoke or the smell bothered her.

More than anything else, though, he was going to wonder whether she always carried dried squid legs around with her.

“If your health suffers, Master Shiroshi will be most distressed.”

“Huh?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Um, that just surprised me a little. It doesn’t feel like I’ve been very useful.”

He didn’t even get why Shiroshi had needed an assistant in the first place. Seiji’s left eye did have the power of the Mirror of Illumination, but he was pretty sure Shiroshi could have gotten by just fine without turning to a magic looking glass for help.

“Since you came, Master Shiroshi has begun to smile more.”

“Huh?”

Seiji really hadn’t been expecting that.

At the same time, joy quietly welled up inside him. Quite a few people had grimaced just because he was around, but he’d never had anyone do the opposite.

Well, in terms of friends, he’d had one once. Technically.

“By the way, how am I doing as an assistant?” Seiji asked impulsively.

“Assistant?” Beniko looked puzzled.

D-don’t tell me…

“I’m sorry. I assumed you were a creature Master Shiroshi had adopted for companionship.”

“…Is it okay if I cry now?”

“You may do as you please,” she said, and held out a box of tissues. Where had she pulled those from? Her kimono sleeve couldn’t possibly have been converted into a 4D pocket, could it?

And then…

“You see, lonely children want to keep pets,” Beniko murmured quietly.

Her words seemed to pierce Seiji’s heart.

Now that he thought about it, the hush that filled this house felt a lot like loneliness. They practically never had visitors, and no family or friends ever stopped by. It had always been just the two of them.

I bet he was bored.

More than anything, he must have been lonely.

The number of books that covered the study wall might be a visible sign of how much time Shiroshi had spent by himself.

Just then, the door opened.

“My, my. What are you two whispering about?” Shiroshi entered, smiling cheerfully. It seemed to be time for three o’clock tea.

When, suddenly…

On her way past, Beniko murmured in Seiji’s ear, “You are the master’s next guest.”

“Huh?”

He shuddered, but by the time he turned around, the red-and-black back of her kimono was already receding toward the kitchen.

“Wh-what was that?”

“Hmm? Is something the matter?”

“No, uh, it’s nothing.” Hastily shaking his head, Seiji resettled himself in his chair.

He must have heard wrong. Even so, it had left him with an unpleasant, uneasy feeling he couldn’t get rid of.

With no heed paid to Seiji's clouded expression, teacups and plates of apple pie materialized in the blink of an eye, and teatime began.

"Heh-heh. The way you eat makes everything look delicious, Seiji."

"It does?"

"Yes. I thought the same when we first met. After all, you were the first person to have a second helping of pie."

If that was a compliment, Seiji didn't mind it, but he did get the feeling Shiroshi was criticizing him in some roundabout way.

"By the way," Shiroshi said, lowering his teacup. "It's been nearly three months since you came here. What are your thoughts on the work?"

"What do I think of the…? I mean, if I could quit, I'd want to."

"My, a ready answer."

"S-sure, if I leave, I won't have a job or a place to live, but—" Without meaning to, Seiji found himself gazing down at the table. Nearly catching sight of his own face in the red surface of the teacup, he hastily averted his eyes. "I just don't think anybody ends up a sinner because they want to."

When it came down to it, the people they'd dealt with had probably got what they deserved. They were headed for Hell either way; the only difference was whether they got there before they died or after.

Still…

Up until now, Seiji had assumed that the sort of people who turned into yokai were like the murderers he'd seen on TV or in the movies—a completely different species, nothing like him.

But maybe they were just weak people.

Maybe they'd committed sins that were bad enough to condemn them to Hell, and maybe they weren't considered worthy of living, but even so, hadn't they lived their lives with everything they had?

"Do you think that way because you yourself are a sinner, Seiji?"

"Huh?" He looked up, startled.

Shiroshi was wearing his usual smile. However, in that moment, Seiji felt the temperature in the room drop. A cold, crawling sensation crept up his spine, and he tried to swallow

the lump in his throat but found he couldn't even do that. It was as if an invisible hand were slowly closing around his throat.

"In that case, this is the last job I will ask you to do as a part-timer."

With a *clink*, Shiroshi returned his teacup to its saucer. As if that had been the signal, Beniko appeared with the usual tea wagon and set an object on the table.

It was a mirror.

Shiroshi turned its polished, gleaming face toward Seiji.

"What do you see *when you look at yourself*?"

Seiji was visibly shaken. His already pale face turned dead white, and his lips trembled. However, that pathetic expression wasn't what the mirror reflected.

It showed a monster that looked nothing like Seiji.

This was why he'd stopped being able to look at mirrors. Why he'd developed the habit of hunching and glaring at the ground as he walked, so that he couldn't even see the shop windows on the street.

And now…

The first mirror he'd looked into in three and a half months showed him a monstrous bird with a human face.

It was a horrifically ugly monster. Its hooked beak was lined with sawlike teeth, scales covered its serpentine body, and its sharp talons were like knives. And…those vacant, unfocused black eyes, their whites clouded and yellow.

The face was all too familiar to Seiji, and it kept saying one phrase to him over and over.

Itsu made: How long?

"Would you tell me what you see?"

Don't, warned a voice in his head.

But even though his voice quivered miserably at times, Seiji told Shiroshi everything. Maybe he'd always wanted to tell someone, really.

Five months ago, a childhood friend from his hometown had come to visit Seiji in his no-bath, no-AC, cockroach-infested apartment.

Taishi Inokoshi.

You would have expected a guy with a name like that to be a brave, valiant type, but unfortunately, his name was the toughest thing about him. When people saw Inokoshi, the first

thing they thought was that he looked like he had a weak stomach. Not to mention he was timid.

Which was exactly how he and Seiji—who was weak in quite a few ways of his own—had hit it off weirdly well. Even after getting into universities in Tokyo, they'd continued meeting up whenever they had the chance.

However, when Inokoshi had gotten a job with one of those exploitative companies that were rampant these days, the cobweb-thin thread of their friendship had snapped quite easily — Or so Seiji had thought, when one day, out of the blue…

"Hey there. Been a while, huh, Seiji."

Inokoshi's face was so haggard Seiji hardly recognized him. His cheeks were as gaunt as an invalid's, and his eyes, whites clouded and yellow, seemed unable to focus. If he'd tottered down a street at night, he would probably have been mistaken for a zombie.

"Wh-what happened to you, man? You look like you just crawled out of a grave."

"Ha-ha. Yeah, that's pretty much what happened. I quit my job."

"Huh?"

Exploiting its wage slaves until they burned out and then tossing them was exactly how those sorts of companies operated.

Inokoshi had always had gastrointestinal trouble, and in the space of half a year, the stuff he'd thrown up had changed from gastric fluid to blood. He'd finally developed a perforation in the lining of his stomach that required emergency hospitalization, and when he was diagnosed with depression as well, his company had wasted no time in firing him. At this point, he said, he was just scraping by on what he could earn from short-term part-time jobs.

"You've really had it rough." As one would expect, Seiji was all too sympathetic to his plight.

All he could offer Inokoshi was water, though, so he did that. Hoping he'd at least be able to make him some instant ramen, Seiji hunted through his kitchen cupboard, but the only thing he found was a bag of rolls he'd bought on clearance. Worse, that bag was all the food Seiji had for the next week.

"Man, you haven't changed a bit." Watching Seiji fret, Inokoshi smiled a bitter, worn-out smile. "Don't worry about it.

In fact, I just came into some extra cash, so I was thinking we could go on one last good bender." His voice was cheerful, and the wallet he held out was fat with bills.

…And just like that, temptation got the better of Seiji.

"L-listen, could you maybe loan me a little of that?"

"Huh?"

Seiji confessed that he'd lost a total of ten part-time jobs, one after another.

Most of the time, his employers had kicked him out and told him never to come back, but for four of them, Seiji hadn't been able to take the storm of abuse, pressure, scolding, and sermons he'd received from his managers, senior workers, and dissatisfied customers, and he had just stopped showing up.

"You seriously haven't changed," Inokoshi told him. His voice was pitched a little higher than normal, with a slight tremble to it. For a moment, Seiji thought he saw something like irritation or contempt in his friend's face, but he quickly reverted to his usual smile. "Yeah, sure, I'll spot you some. But tonight, come drinking with me!"

They partied until morning, and when Seiji woke up, feeling sluggish and completely hungover, Inokoshi was gone.

On the table was one measly thousand yen bill, and—

Sorry.

Inokoshi had scrawled the brief note on the back of a receipt.

That jerk. He must've decided he didn't want to loan me money after all and left.

And so, without trying to get in touch with Inokoshi again, Seiji resumed his routine of quitting and getting fired over and over.

Six weeks later…

Seiji's apartment got another caller: a young guy with a shaved head, flashy purple suit, and a chunky, shiny gold watch. His look couldn't have screamed *yakuza* any louder.

"Are you Seiji Tohno? You owe us some money," the man said in a gravelly voice as soon as Seiji opened the door. He was holding a loan agreement from Inokoshi.

Seiji's name was in the guarantor column. Incredibly, the paper was even stamped with his own personal seal. With a start, Seiji ran to check its hiding place and discovered it was gone. Had Inokoshi swiped it while he was passed out drunk?

“Y’see, Mr. Inokoshi’s up and vanished on us. We went to the dump where he lives, but nobody answered the door, which means that as of today, this debt belongs to you.”

“H-how much is it?”

“One. Million. Yen. A million yen! And you better pay up, pal, or you’re gonna wish you’d never been born!”

There was no way Seiji had that kind of money. For the time being, he managed to get the guy to leave by groveling and swearing he’d find Inokoshi for him.

Then he’d called every single mutual acquaintance they had and found out about Inokoshi’s secret predicament.

Having lost his job due to a double whammy of stomach pain and depression, Inokoshi had managed to live on unemployment insurance for a little while, but his account balance had kept dwindling by the day. In an attempt to bolster his finances, he’d turned to pachinko slot machines.

As a result, he’d wound up with a raging gambling addiction, racking up mountains of debt in the blink of an eye.

Before long, the debt collectors stormed in: Defamatory faxes were sent to places in his neighborhood, his door intercom rang in the dead of night, a bombardment of take-out delivery men showed up at his door with pizza and sushi and soba noodles…

When Inokoshi had turned up at Seiji’s place, he’d already been planning to die. He’d gotten his hands on that wad of cash so he could live it up one last time. And then Seiji had gone and tried to bum some of it off him.

There was no telling what had changed with Inokoshi, but one thing was clear: He’d set Seiji up as his guarantor, saddled him with his debts, and vanished into thin air.

After that…

“I went to the place Inokoshi rented. The front door was locked, and it didn’t look like anybody was there. Still, I thought he might just be faking that he wasn’t home, so I went in.”

“Oh? How did you get inside?”

“I’d heard he kept a spare key taped to the bottom of the gas meter, so I used that to open the door, and then—”

Remembering, Seiji shivered.

He’d found Inokoshi in a bathroom spotted with black mold, face down in a basin full of water, in a pose that made it look like he was begging for forgiveness.

“So you left Inokoshi’s corpse where it was and fled your apartment in the dead of night to escape the loan sharks?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

The shame of it made his knees quake.

That was how Seiji had begun living out of net cafés. Shiroshi had taken him in as his assistant and freeloader just as his money ran out.

“I would imagine your friend’s body hasn’t been found yet.” Shiroshi sighed. “The *itsumade* is a monstrous bird that’s shown in Toriyama Sekien’s *The Illustrated Demon Horde from Past and Present, Continued*. It first appeared in 1334, after many people died from a plague, leaving mountains of uncremated bodies piled outside the capital. Their deep-seated resentment became a monster that cried, *Itsu made, itsu made*: ‘How long will you neglect our corpses?’”

Did that mean Inokoshi was pleading with Seiji? *How long will you leave my corpse to rot? How long will you refuse to see reality? How long, how long…?*

That voice might have been the whisper of Seiji’s own heart, too: *How long are you going to be like this?*

In hindsight, his life had been one long disgrace.

When are you going to get it together?

As far back as he could remember, everyone around him had scolded him with those words, and he’d plugged his ears so he wouldn’t hear them. Sometimes he’d sulked, knees hugged against his chest, and in the end, he’d run from every hardship that stood in his way.

He’d run, and run, and run, and then—

“As soon as you wandered in at twilight, the ‘hour of demons,’ I knew you’d sinned. After all, the signs outside are only visible to sinners who ought to visit this mansion.”

The words *bug zapper* rose in the back of Seiji’s mind.

To those who were lost in the darkness of sin, the house under the sacred anise tree was the only light there was. Even if their first step toward it ensured they’d burn in the fires of Hell, people weren’t strong enough to wander alone in darkness forever.

“That said, since it was you, I’d assumed it wasn’t anything that awful. In that regard, once again, you’ve surpassed my expectations. This is really quite…”

Petty seemed to be the word Shiroshi bit back.

Even at a time like this, the guy was incredibly rude. Seiji wasn't his assistant or freeloader right now, just a sinner awaiting judgment, and still he…

"By the way, Seiji, do you resent Inokoshi?"

Shiroshi's eyes seemed like deep, dark portals into Hell. If they came to rest on you, that was it: You'd fall headlong into darkness.

Frankly, Seiji was afraid. Even though he had nothing left to lose, he was still scared out of his mind.

And yet…

"No, I don't." After a moment's hesitation, he shook his head. It might sound like a lie, but even so, weirdly enough, he didn't feel any resentment or anger. Most of the unfairness he'd encountered had ended up being the consequences of shit he'd done, so he figured this was another one of those times.

Inokoshi probably hadn't dragged Seiji into debtors' hell because of any sort of pent-up resentment, either. He just hadn't wanted to go to Hell by himself.

Now that he thought about it, even though his only friend had died, Seiji still hadn't managed to shed a single tear over his death. Maybe that made them even.

"That really is just like you, Seiji," Shiroshi said, almost to himself. The faint trace of an amused smile played on his lips. "This isn't the first time I've thought so, but the way you refrain from blaming your misfortunes on others is one of your virtues. Now, then…" He reached for his teacup. "Upon investigating, Inokoshi proved to have loans with five companies, including the one you knew about. With interest, the total debt had grown to thirty million yen. It sounds as if they were preparing to sell off all your organs. Including your heart, of course." Shiroshi smiled at him.

So basically, if the loan sharks had grabbed him while he was on the run and living in net cafés, they would have carved him up for sale right then and there.

Which meant that he was bound for Hell either way. That fortune he'd gotten at the convenience store had been pretty accurate after all.

Then…

"So Beniko and I visited their respective offices and settled things with those gentlemen from the yakuza. I have purchased you for the sum of thirty million yen."

He'd spoken so matter-of-factly that Seiji froze up for a full minute.

…What did he just say?

"Huh? Wha—? Hang on a minute! What's that about?!"

"As I said, Seiji, I agreed to buy up your loans for thirty million yen, paid in cash—"

"No, not that! I—I mean, yeah, that, too, but—! Earlier, Beniko told me that I was your next guest!"

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Yes, that was…" Pausing in the act of cutting a second slice of apple pie, Beniko looked up. Her tone was indifferent, her face as expressionless as ever. "A joke."

Seiji felt his consciousness start to leave him.

Beniko, who came across as the perfect superhuman, had one fatal flaw:

She was—quite literally—deathly bad at jokes.

"Of course, I'll have you work to pay off the debt, meaning that your part-time job ends today. Simply put, you will work here for free for the rest of your life, and we will call that the condition for your atonement. Now, what will you do?"

The hand he held out seemed like a chain meant to bind a prisoner to his cell.

Oh, right, Seiji thought.

He'd run, and run, and run, and then—

He'd been caught by one of Hell's demons, someone he could never escape.

"Well then, shall we continue our tea?" Shiroshi said, smiling. Clasped in his hand was Seiji's, extended as proof of his agreement to their deal, like a dog practicing *shake* with its owner.

*

In this world, some *oni* may keep humans as pets.

The End

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Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Yoru Michio. Thank you very much for picking up *Hell Is Dark with No Flowers*.

As the saying goes, “Hell is right below the floorboards,” and sometimes I can’t help but feel that a single wrong step could be enough to turn this world into a living hell.

Looking back, ever since grade school, I’ve always had an interest in things to do with war, crime, and murder, almost as if my inner child has been trying to answer the question “What does it mean to be human?” by learning what happens to people when they’re put in extreme, hellish situations.

I may have just been stirring up the muck in the hopes of discovering something bright and sparkling in the depths, though. I guess I wanted to believe that that “something” was inside me as well, so I could set my mind at ease living as a person. Ever since I got the idea of writing this book, that colorless, formless mud and light have been constantly in a corner of my mind.

If Hell really is right below the floorboards, and if everyone is a ghost or a demon once you strip away their mask, then it may be some kind of miracle that we can be good toward each other anyway and find support in one another. I think that’s true of *oni* and humans—and of pets and their owners as well.

If I’ve managed to capture even a little of that horror, virtue, and loneliness on paper, I’ll be thrilled.

Even though the first volume has ended, the story’s far from over, and if you enjoyed the antics of this mismatched pair, then nothing could make me happier. I hope we’ll meet again.

April 2018

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