
Hell Is Dark with No Flowers
Island of the Living Doll
2
Yoru Michio

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Island of the Living Doll

YORU MICHIO

Translation by Taylor Engel
Cover art by Maiko Aoji

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Contents

Mystery 1 Hidarugami, or Prologue

Mystery 2 Oni

Mystery 3 Resurrection, or Epilogue

Takamura Ono

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

Seiji Tohno

Shiroshi's assistant.
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?**

Aka

A boy who claims to be Shiroshi's younger brother.



Kouji Ayatsuji

The owner of Kiou Island. A dollmaker.

Riko Ayatsuji

Kouji's daughter.

Hari Ayatsuji

Kouji's wife who died ten years ago.

Kazusa Ayatsuji

Riko's cousin.
A fashion designer.

Shirou Ayatsuji

Riko's cousin, Kazusa's older half brother.
The next head of the Ayatsuji family.

Junichirou Shimomura

Kouji's and Riko's attendant and personal physician.

Mystery 1

Hidarugami, or Prologue

In this world, there may be a goldfish who doesn't smirk.

*

The woods were just a step outside the door.

Or at least, that was how the huge sacred anise tree growing there made it feel. In fact, Seiji had only stepped out of the house, where he'd been living for some time now, for a smoke.

Light filtered through the foliage above him, making the leaves glow all different shades of green. Since they blocked the direct sunlight, it was unexpectedly cool for early August, and the rustle of the canopy was nearly the only thing he could hear.

Every time he stood in this spot, he felt as if he'd somehow wandered past the edge of the world.

And every time, the same two words surfaced in the back of his mind:

Bug zapper.

He'd heard somewhere once that the genus of the tree, known as *shikimi* in Japanese, was *illicium*. Apparently, it was derived from the Latin word *illicio*, which meant "to draw in," or "to lure."

Seiji was one of the moths who'd been drawn to this place. At this point, he was a universally acknowledged freeloader—although he technically held the title of "live-in assistant."

Taking a cigarette out of his crushed pack, he lit it with a cheap lighter.

When he turned around, he could see a brick path stretching away until it was swallowed up by green shadows. Beyond that stood a mansion from the 1920s, its architecture a fusion of

Japanese and Western styles. It was a sight straight out of a fairy tale, but he was used to it by now.

Somehow, he'd been staying here for seven months already.

The sacred anise tree had put out white flowers in early spring, yet even now that it was covered in green summer foliage, the days still passed as peacefully as a soak in a lukewarm bath. At odd moments, though, he'd remember…

Demons live here.

"Well, I guess I'll head back."

With a little sigh, he got rid of the spent butt of his cigarette, then walked up the path.

Before long, he reached the front door. It stood open, as if in invitation, and a sign posted on it said PLEASE COME IN. Every time he saw those words, they reminded him of *The Restaurant of Many Orders*.

As a matter of fact, that wasn't too far from the truth; while it wasn't run by a cat monster, there could be no doubt of its connection to inhuman things. It was a genuine yokai mansion.

The master of the house was a half-human, half-yokai supernatural named Shiroshi Saijou. He was the noble son and heir of Sanmoto Gorouzaemon, the Demon King who'd made an appearance in the *Ino Mononoke Roku.*

"I'm baaack."

What he saw when he opened the door to the study was familiar as well. Windows hung with drapes that looked like theater curtains took up the back of the room, while most of the right-hand wall was covered by bookshelves that reached all the way to the ceiling.

The sight was always overwhelming. Before Seiji had grown used to it, he'd flinched a little every time he opened the door, but by this point, it was just a regular part of his day.

The same was true of the boy sitting at the cabriole-legged table in the center of the room.

"Welcome home, Seiji. You're just in time for tea."

The boy had black hair and eyes, and he seemed to be about fifteen or sixteen. As usual, he was reading a difficult-looking book, and the back of the Queen Anne–styled chair he was sitting in was molded into graceful, vine-like curves. At first glance, his kimono looked as stark white as a burial robe, but it was actually

ombré-dyed. The faint ink shading sketched the contours of large peonies in full bloom, their snow-white petals radiating an ominous, bewitching dignity.

The king of a thousand flowers.

"My, my. Smoking outside again?"

"Yeah, I sort of didn't want Beniko to see."

"She does seem to be attempting to get you to quit. Granted, a pack a day does seem a bit overindulgent."

"…Uh, do you think we'll be having apple pie again today?" Pretending he hadn't heard, Seiji sat down in the chair across from him.

Shiroshi gave a soft, wry smile. He was the very model of a sheltered young lady—or rather, young man—from a fine family. Calling him an "indoor type" would be a nice way to put it, but he was really one step shy of being a complete shut-in.

Before long, Beniko, Shiroshi's attendant, appeared and began making preparations for a rather late afternoon tea. Between this and everything else, their peaceful days seemed to pass quietly.

If only things would continue like this forever.

Although this was Seiji's heartfelt wish, it was one he would probably never see fulfilled. Not as long as Shiroshi ran a proxy service for Hell.

It was the duty of the wicked to receive punishment befitting their sins, and Hell's demons came for those who escaped retribution in this world. Shiroshi acted as a proxy of sorts for those demons.

All this made him sound like a professional assassin, and that was pretty close to the truth…with the one crucial, hopeless difference being that his client was none other than the Great King Enma.

And Seiji was young Shiroshi's assistant-slash-freeloader.

It had all begun when Taishi Inokoshi, Seiji's only friend, had sold him out by making him the guarantor for Taishi's loans. Seiji had been about to be carved up for his organs when Shiroshi had bought his debt from the loan sharks. And he'd done so for the lump sum of thirty million yen, paid in cash.

Ever since, Seiji had been working for free as Shiroshi's live-in assistant. Although…was it his imagination, or was his title growing more tenuous by the day? After all, he was a mediocre,

completely ordinary guy, and Shiroshi seemed to see him as a kind of pet, like a dog or a cat. Not to mention the fact that he hadn't really done anything impressive as an assistant…

Yet here he was.

"Matcha and red bean jam never fails to be delicious," said Shiroshi.

"Oh, this one's good, too," Seiji said. "Here, Blue Hawaii."

"Heh-heh. What flavor *is* 'Blue Hawaii,' exactly?"

About an hour later, the pair was having a conversation as mindless as that of two middle schoolers chatting in a food court. In front of them sat clear, summery cut glass bowls heaped high with shaved ice.

With every mouthful he took, Seiji felt both coolness and sweetness spread all through his body.

Beniko's handmade shaved ice was light on the tongue and melted away almost instantly. Apparently, the trick was in the way she shaved the ice; Seiji could never have turned out anything like this by cranking away on one of those penguin-shaped shaved ice machines.

It was the sort of blissful moment that could only be enjoyed in summer. Their usual apple pie wasn't something Seiji would ever get tired of, but he couldn't have been more grateful for these occasional variations.

"Oh, come to think of it, there's a new shaved ice place in front of the station. They've always got a line," Seiji said suddenly.

The shop had only just opened, but between their house-made syrups loaded with seasonal fruit and the naturally sourced ice they used specifically for its quality, they were doing such good business that people often spent an hour in line just to get one.

"In that case, shall I have Beniko go and try it, then make us the same thing?"

"…Huh?"

The idea of such mind-boggling talent left Seiji speechless.

However, as far as Shiroshi was concerned, apparently lining up in the blazing sun had never been an option. Seriously, how spoiled could he get?

"Heh-heh. Certain circumstances make it difficult for me to go outside, you see, and Beniko is like an elder sister."

Hmm. That was the first Seiji had heard of these "circumstances," but the part about Beniko being like a sister to Shiroshi had a ring of truth to it. Although, since she took care of his every need, she might be more like a mom.

"Now that you mention it, do you have any brothers or sisters, Shiroshi?"

Seiji had just asked the question that popped into his head, but for some reason, Shiroshi looked as though he had a fish bone caught in his throat.

"Well, I'm told that my father, Sanmoto Gorouzaemon, first arrived in Japan around the time of the Genpei War."

Apparently, he'd first come to rubberneck at the fighting but had taken a liking to the food and decided to settle here permanently. *So, sort of like an invasive species?* Seiji thought. *Like fire ants, or black bass.*

"It's said he subsequently acquired more than twenty concubines," Shiroshi went on impassively.

What was he, a maharajah? Seiji silently retorted.

"…and thirty-one sons in addition to myself."

…I see. Definitely a maharajah.

"However, by the time I was old enough to know about them, they were all gone."

"Huh?"

That sounded deeply significant—yet it wasn't the words themselves but the shadow that crossed Shiroshi's expression that gave Seiji that impression.

"Um, what do you mean…?"

He'd once had thirty-one brothers, and they'd all died? Seiji would've loved to ask how that had happened, but tactlessly prying into the matter didn't seem like a good idea.

So he decided to play it safe for now and switch topics.

"Oh, uh, Shiroshi?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"I've never actually seen Beniko smile."

"My, my," Shiroshi said, blinking as though he'd been caught off guard. "I believe she tells jokes quite often."

…Yes. Yes, she does.

"Heh-heh. She hardly ever laughs aloud, but she does smile on occasion."

“Sh-she does? I’d love to see that!”

“Well, let’s see… Taking a photograph would be impolite, so shall we ask her in person? Here she comes now.”

“Huh?!”

When Seiji turned around, he saw that Beniko had appeared with the tea wagon.

Even in summer, she was dressed like a traditional Japanese maid in scarlet and black, colors that made her look like a *torachoubi* goldfish. Her unnaturally large, dark eyes also seemed more goldfish than human.

…Though that might be because she actually *was* a goldfish in human shape.

“Um, listen, Beniko?”

Putting it mildly, this was about as awkward as having to go to a certain hamburger shop and order “One smile, please” as the penalty for losing a game. Seiji fumbled his way through the request, making all sorts of weird faces as he did, but in the end, Beniko’s answer was incredibly simple.

“I’m sorry. I was originally a fish, so I do not know how to smile.”

“……”

“I’m joking.”

O-of course she is.

Seiji gave a dry laugh, and a pensive silence fell for a while.

“Very well,” Beniko eventually said. “If the opportunity presents itself, I shall.”

“I-I’ll be looking forward to it!” he shouted in a fluster.

Giving him a small, indifferent bow, Beniko left the room.

She was as much of an enigma as ever. Still, knowing that she did smile sometimes was a bit of a relief. He’d never seen an expressive fish, but he did remember seeing a human-faced carp on TV laughing at ice cream–eating spectators standing on the banks of its pond—

Wait. Ice cream?

“Oh!”

“My, what is it?”

“That homemade ice cream Beniko made the day before yesterday! Wouldn’t putting that on shaved ice make it taste even better?”

“I see. Yes, that does sound good.”

“We could try adding canned fruit *anmitsu*, too. I think that’d be a great combination.”

“Heh-heh, do you suppose matcha ice cream and brown sugar syrup would go with it as well?”

“They’d be perfect together!”

“Shall we ask for that tomorrow, then?”

“Absolutely!”

“In that case, run to the supermarket before night falls, if you would.”

“……Huh?” Seiji looked startled.

Still smiling, Shiroshi dug a spoonful of shaved ice from his bowl with a soft, crisp sound, then brought it to his mouth. “After all, this *was* your suggestion,” he said with a chuckle.

Seiji got the vague feeling he’d been hustled.

“You may spend the change on cigarettes.”

“I’ll go right away, sir!”

Thinking there was no time like the present, Seiji got up from the table. He immediately felt a cold gaze directed toward him from the room beyond the door, but he decided to assume he’d imagined it.

“It will be dark soon. Take care not to lose your way,” Shiroshi said, giving Seiji a firm pat on the back.

It felt as if Shiroshi had been patting him on the back an awful lot lately. Was that just his attempt at bonding? Still puzzling over it, Seiji left the house.

*

The moment Seiji stepped out of the tunnel with its thick green curtain of Japanese ivy, the sound of the cicadas got louder. All he could see were those black wooden fences that seemed to go on forever, so he wondered where the cicadas would even be.

Crap, it’s already six.

Grumbling inwardly, he started walking faster. The long, thin shadow that stretched away from his feet looked like a scorch mark, and the world had begun to dim, as if he were seeing everything through a pane of pale blue frosted glass.

Twilight, the time of day when human and inhuman crossed paths, was drawing near. And in Seiji's case, there was a very good chance he might actually run into something if he was unlucky.

That's the one thing I just can't get used to.

At this time of night, Hell-bound sinners were drawn like moths to a flame to the house where Shiroshi ran his proxy service. To Seiji, those guests looked like monsters—the result of an accident when he was little that left a fragment of the Mirror of Illumination in his left eye and gave him the ability to see people's hidden sins as yokai.

That was why he'd always done his best to avoid going out during twilight, but…

"…Huh?"

A white figure was standing right in front of him.

The word *ghost* flashed through his mind, but a second later, Seiji realized it was a high school girl in a white sailor uniform.

If he had to say whether she was beautiful or not, he would choose the former. She was fair-skinned and petite, and her navy blue scarf and bobbed hair that curled in at the ends made her seem trim and tidy.

"Oh!"

The girl had noticed Seiji as well, and she trotted up to him, looking relieved.

"Excuse me. Do you live nearby? I'm afraid I've gotten lost."

She was *normal*. Seiji's perspective had been skewed lately by his unusual employer, so this girl was so normal that he was a little impressed.

And yet…

"I was told there was a huge sacred anise tree around here, with a European-style house near it."

Seiji found himself taking a long, hard look at the girl's face.

She couldn't be a guest, could she? No matter how much he stared, though, she didn't turn into a yokai. That meant she wasn't a sinner herself.

In which case…

"What business do you have with that house?"

"Oh, good. You do know it."

Argh. I should've pretended I didn't.

“My name is Serina Suzuki. My cram school teacher told me he came here for advice last summer—”

Oh. It sounded like something had gotten mixed up in communication and she’d gotten the idea that an amazing fortune teller or counselor lived there.

Thank goodness. I guess she really is just lost.

Come to think of it, if she actually *was* a sinner, she wouldn’t have gotten lost in the first place; there was only one road with no turnoffs, and if you followed it to the tunnel at the end, there was even a sign pointing the way.

Long story short, it was a camouflage spell. From what Seiji had heard, no one except Hell-bound sinners could reach the house where Shiroshi lived. To every other passerby, it was just a dead end. A labyrinth.

“Do you work at that house, mister?”

“Um, well, something like that.”

Technically, he was a freeloader-slash-pet.

“Oh, I see. Is that right.”

Out of nowhere, Seiji felt a strange chill that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Serina was gazing up at him steadily.

She seemed as normal as ever, and yet Seiji felt a creeping, ominous sense of unease.

Something was off. That said, all he had to go on were unsettled impressions that it felt weird, wrong, warped—but he couldn’t figure out what was causing them.

“Good. That’s perfect.”

Smiling in relief, Serina took something out of her schoolbag.

A carving knife.

“Huh?”

The air seemed to creak around them. The girl’s expression hadn’t changed. However, she kept a firm grip on that sinister, gleaming weapon.

In that moment, Seiji realized what had felt wrong about her.

Oh, that’s it… She isn’t blinking.

In the wild, life and death is decided in a fraction of a second; animals keep their eyes fixed on their prey, watching for the first moment of vulnerability. The way she was looking at him was just like that.

Yeah, it's those eyes—she's got the eyes of an inhuman predator.

Run, run, run!

Seiji immediately bolted, but his toe caught on a bump in the road, and he pitched forward.

"Sh-shit… Yagh!"

Flustered, he turned to see that Serina was already charging, holding the knife at waist-level.

"Agh, agh, agh!"

The carving knife lashed out toward him like a striking snake. Seiji jumped back to evade, but in his haste, he teetered backward. As his butt hit the ground, the tip of the knife came down right where he'd been a second earlier, missing him by a hair.

"Eeep! St-stop—"

Even as he tried to scramble to his feet, a follow-up attack came at Seiji from above. He pulled his head in like a turtle to avoid it, and the tip of the blade struck the asphalt, missing its mark. The recoil knocked the knife out of Serina's hand, but the girl immediately whirled around to go after it. With her hair whipping wildly around her, she looked just like a demon hag in an old story. Serina bent down slightly to retrieve her weapon, and—

Now!

Seiji shoved her in the back, throwing his full weight against her.

Serina put both arms over her stomach and twisted her upper body away from the asphalt as she fell. She didn't get up immediately, which Seiji took to mean that she must have hit her shoulder pretty hard.

If he was going to run, this was his only chance.

Hastily changing directions, Seiji took off as fast as he could—but then it hit him.

The road continued straight like this for ages. If he tried to escape that way, he'd end up in a drag race for his life with a knife-wielding demon hag.

Argh, dammit. I'm gonna risk it!

Acting on impulse, Seiji left the road. He grabbed the top of a section of the black fence, pulled himself up, then clambered over.

If he landed in somebody's yard, he'd clearly be trespassing. It had been a desperate gamble, and he knew he might need to brace for an encounter with the cops, but—

"Huh?"

He'd landed in a graveyard.

Several hundred gravestones were scattered throughout the thick undergrowth. Beyond them, nearly hidden in a bamboo thicket, he could see the crumbling tile roof of an abandoned temple.

If this wasn't an abandoned cemetery, then Seiji didn't know what was.

"…You've got to be kidding me."

Who would have guessed that something like this was just on the other side of that black fence?

Did they lay the road through a plot of neglected graves when they built it?

A shiver went down his spine, but just then, he heard a pair of loafers walk past on the other side of the fence.

Serina.

Holding his breath, Seiji concentrated all his focus on his hearing.

Her footsteps came and went for a little while, as if she were looking for him, then finally receded into the distance.

"Sh-she's gone…"

Seiji let out a sigh of relief and slumped weakly to the ground.

He should be all right hiding here. He didn't know where Serina had gone, but she'd probably give up soon—

Huh? Hang on.

Seiji suddenly felt as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped over his head.

Hadn't Serina's footsteps disappeared toward the house, where Shiroshi and Beniko were waiting?

Not good! That's really *not good!*

Come to think of it, she'd been wandering around the alley specifically because she'd been trying to get to the house. With a carving knife hidden in her bag…

Seiji didn't know what the girl was up to, but she clearly wasn't here for advice on some adolescent problem. She might

already have passed through the green tunnel and be walking through the open front door into the house.

I have to warn them!

Seiji scrambled back over the fence and started sprinting—then remembered the smartphone in his back pocket. He scrolled through his pathetically sparse list of contacts until he found the number for the landline to the house, then called it, praying hard as he listened to it ring. Finally, Beniko's voice answered.

"Hello?"

"G-girl with a knife! Headed your way!" he shouted, sending spittle flying, when—

"Hmm? Is that Seiji Tohno?"

Seiji gave a wordless shriek and dropped his phone.

He turned around and saw a boy he didn't recognize, whose style could only be described as "old-fashioned young detective."

What—what's with this kid?

He looked to be around twelve or thirteen. His honey-colored eyes tilted up at the outside like a European cat's and made a striking contrast with his black hair. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt, trousers with suspenders, and a newsboy cap adorned with a crimson peony.

Even in the gloom of twilight, the flower was vivid—a shade of red like blood, so deep you could almost smell it.

"Wow, what a coincidence! It's a pleasure to meet you! Your luck must truly be awful for us to run into each other at a time like this. I bet you hear that a lot, don't you?"

"Wh-what?"

Seiji was sure they'd never met—pretty sure, at least—but the boy kept talking to him as if they already knew each other. Bewildered, Seiji backed away.

The boy scoffed.

"How about that? You're not wearing a collar."

"What?"

"Oh, I was just a little curious as to how one would keep a pet human… I guess it's surprisingly ordinary."

The boy muttered something that Seiji couldn't quite catch and scuffed the toe of his shoe on the pavement, as if to say *How boring.*

Just then…

“I foooound you.”

It was like some sort of bad joke.

Seiji fearfully looked behind him, and there was Serina. The blade of her carving knife was clean, meaning that for better or for worse, she’d turned back before reaching the house.

Raising the knife, she slowly started toward Seiji, but then—

“Huh?”

Serina flinched, then froze like a wild animal who’d sensed a more dangerous predator. She was looking at the mystery boy.

“Wh-what are you doing here?”

“It’s been a long time, Serina. Unfortunately, we’ll be saying our good-byes right away.”

The boy’s voice was light and melodic, and when he giggled, the look in his eyes was a mixture of pity and contempt. Like a conductor waving a baton, he smoothly pointed a finger at the girl…

“Ha-ha! Oh, don’t be so scared. This won’t hurt.”

He grinned mockingly at her, his face like that of an *oni*—

And then he snapped his fingers.

Serina immediately collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She fell to her knees and went still for a little while, seemingly lost in a daze. Then, with a low, harsh groan, she doubled over as if her guts were spilling out of her abdomen and she was trying to hold them in.

And then…

“Hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry.”

Repeating the same word over and over, the girl began scraping at the asphalt with the tip of her knife. Then she grabbed a handful of the gravel she’d dislodged and shoved it into her mouth.

Crunch, krrk krrk, grrk…… Ulp.

“……Urgh!” The sound she made when she chewed was like nothing on earth, and Seiji felt his stomach turn over.

Serina unsteadily got to her feet.

“Oh, that’s right…,” she said, as if something had occurred to her.

She pressed her left hand to her lower abdomen and slowly rubbed it in a circle.

"I *have* food."

She gave a wide, half-moon grin. Shifting her grip on the knife so that it pointed toward her, she set its tip against her belly.

Don't tell me…

Seiji had never thought so fast in his life.

By "food," does she mean…?

People normally try to catch themselves with their hands when they're pushed to the ground without warning, yet only a few minutes ago, Serina had shielded her stomach and broken her fall with her shoulder instead. It was as if she'd been involuntarily protecting something inside of her.

In which case, was that carving knife pointing at a *baby*?

"Whoa-whoa-whoa, hang on!"

Seiji's body moved before his mind could catch up. He lunged at Serina and clung to her right arm, holding back both her wrist and the hilt of the knife.

The next moment, pain exploded across his face. Serina had swung the knife at random, trying to shake him off, and its tip had grazed Seiji's left eye.

The intense pain seemed to punch right through his brain, and Seiji's knees dumped him on the ground. When he pressed a palm over his eyelid, something slick and lukewarm dripped down his hand. Blood had definitely been shed.

And then.

"Oh, yaaay! This one looks yummy, too."

Terrific. He'd managed to turn her bloodlust on himself.

It would have been simpler to just give up and say his prayers, but there was absolutely no way he was going to let himself get chopped up into mincemeat. Seiji hastily tried to scramble away, but pain and blood loss had turned his legs to jelly.

That was when it happened.

Something flew over Seiji's head from behind him and knocked the knife out of Serina's hand.

Was that…a shoe?

Unless he'd been seeing things, it had been a short black leather boot. Serina glared at the pitcher, her face a mask of rage, and then—

Clap.

There was a short, sharp sound, and the girl crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

“Excellent pitching control, Beniko. I would expect no less of you.”

“I’m honored.”

Those voices. It can’t be…

Turning, Seiji saw Beniko, who was balancing on one foot, alongside Shiroshi. When Shiroshi registered the blood covering half of Seiji’s face, his eyes widened slightly.

“My, my.”

…I knew it.

Seiji groaned inwardly at seeing the exact response he’d expected. Maybe Shiroshi wouldn’t have completely lost his cool, but would it have killed him to show at least a little surprise?

“You’ve lost quite a bit of blood, but the wound itself isn’t serious. I’ve done what I can for the time being, so let’s go to the hospital later—”

Shiroshi had quickly stanched the bleeding with a handkerchief, but his hands suddenly went still.

“…Don’t tell me it scratched your cornea.”

For a moment, something very cold crept into his voice.

“Aww, too bad. It didn’t work. I thought getting her sent to Hell would make the perfect gift.”

The voice was so light and cheerful that it sounded out of place. Shiroshi immediately stepped in front of Seiji, facing the other boy squarely.

Two peonies blooming in different colors—one white, one crimson.

“Now then, who might you be? And who is this woman?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a long story, but that’s Serina Suzuki. Do you remember a man named Tohru Sonomachi?”

“The nineteenth guest, yes. Or ‘former guest,’ to be accurate.”

Apparently, Tohru Sonomachi’s crime had been murder. Back in middle school, he’d killed a classmate who was the ringleader of a group of bullies, falsified eyewitness testimony, and pinned the crime on a total stranger.

Last August, Tohru had wandered into that house. Shiroshi had exposed his sins, as usual, and Tohru had turned himself in

to the police in order to atone for his crime.

“A happy ending, sure, but there was just one problem left behind: her. Mr. Sonomachi had taught Serina at cram school. She was his student and his lover.”

The boy’s singsong voice made Seiji remember what Serina had told him earlier.

“My cram school teacher told me he came here for advice last summer.”

So she’d been talking about Tohru Sonomachi?

No—the most concerning part of this was that the boy spoke as if he knew about Shiroshi’s proxy service for Hell.

“Serina has attempted suicide multiple times since middle school; she couldn’t forgive Mr. Sonomachi for choosing to turn himself in to the police over a *mere murder* instead of staying with her. So she hooked up with several men she found through a dating app, got herself pregnant, and showed up at the jail where he was being held. She told him, ‘I’m going to have this baby to make you realize what you’ve done.’ ”

What…was *that* supposed to mean? It made no sense. There was no reason or logic to it, and more than anything, it was completely unfair to the child she was carrying.

“He was the first person she wanted to take revenge on. The second was you. After all, you were the one who set him on that course.”

No good deed goes unpunished.

“However, even after she found what seemed like the right place, she just couldn’t get there. It has that spell on it, of course, so that’s no surprise. That was when I connected with her and gave her a word of advice: ‘If you kill someone, just like he did, you’ll make it there without getting lost.’ ”

In other words…

It was this boy’s fault that Serina had been loitering in this alley with a carving knife in her bag and that she’d attacked Seiji when he said he had ties to the house.

“I see. So you found someone who had the makings of a criminal, spurred her on so she would be damned, then had a *hidarugami* possess her?”

Shiroshi’s words made Seiji blink in surprise.

Huh? What did he just say?

“As the words ‘*darui*’ and ‘*hidarui*,’ meaning ‘lethargic’ and ‘famished’ suggest, a *hidarugami* is a type of yokai that possesses travelers on mountain roads and torments them with a maddening hunger. In some extreme cases, it can even cause a person to take their own life. One theory has it that they are the spirits of those who collapsed and died of starvation on that spot, long ago.”

“Correct! That’s the yokai I had possess Serina. The fact that we were interrupted was kind of unfortunate, but whatever,” the boy said, sticking out his tongue slightly. Then, in a rather theatrical gesture, he whisked off his cap and pressed it to his chest. He looked like a circus ringmaster asking the audience for applause. “I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I? My name is Aka, written with the character for ‘scarlet.’ I’m the illegitimate son of Demon King Sanmoto Gorouzaemon, which makes me your little brother. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Even Shiroshi froze in shock.

Aka took something from the pocket of his short trousers and threw it to Seiji, as if tossing food to a stray dog. “Now seems like a good time to give you this. Though if you dropped dead from that wound right here, I’d be fine with that as well.”

It was a piece of paper folded into quarters. The message on it seemed to have been written by Aka himself in fountain pen, and it read:

TO MASTER SEIJI TOHNO. I WRITE TO YOU ON THIS AUSPICIOUS DAY IN JULY CHALLENGING YOU TO A DUEL.

Incredibly, it was a letter of challenge.

“I propose a contest to see which of us would make a better assistant for this proxy service. In other words, I’m applying for your job. That business a moment ago was my pitch.”

It *was* the blood loss that was making his head spin…right?

Seiji sat there, stupefied. Aka had begun twirling his cap on the tip of one finger, and he looked down at Seiji as coldly as if he were a squashed fly. “Granted, I doubt there’s anything to prove here. No matter how you look at it, he’s far too slow, cowardly, and useless. Frankly, I’m a hundred times more capable than he is.”

“Well, so is most of the world when you compare them to Seiji.”

Couldn't you at least talk smack about the injured guy somewhere else?

Seiji gave Shiroshi as cold a glare as he could manage, but Shiroshi just ignored it and took another step forward, protectively putting both Beniko and Seiji behind his small back.

"However, no matter who your competition was, I would never choose you."

One of Aka's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? Have I offended you somehow?" He put his cap back on his head, and the spark of irritation that crackled in the depths of the boy's eyes made Seiji break out in goose bumps.

His temper had bloomed a more ominous shade of red than the crimson peony.

"Ha-ha! I'm sorry; I'm only being myself. Making enemies is something I'm particularly good at."

Right then, Seiji was sure of it:

This boy was definitely Shiroshi's little brother.

"Well," Shiroshi began, "I suppose I should explain my reasons. You made two mistakes here. The first was taking an individual who might not have committed a crime and intentionally setting her up to become a sinner. And the second was that you meant to take the life of the child she carries, along with hers."

...Tack on the fact that he wounded me as a third reason, all right?

As Seiji hoped against hope that Shiroshi would stand up for him, Aka just blinked in surprise, then shrugged as if to say *You can't be serious*.

"I hear Tohru Sonomachi ended up having a mental breakdown in jail, and they transferred him to a medical prison. That's the sort of person Serina is: The more involved with her you are, the unhappier you become. Her child will obviously be no exception. If it's going to be unhappy from the moment it's born, wouldn't it be better for it never to be born at all?"

No, you know that's not right, Seiji tried to say aloud—but all that came out was a groan.

His mind was clouding over, and his fingertips were getting colder by the second.

It felt as if he was losing track of everything except the relentless, throbbing pain.

“Well, I’ll come back some other time. You’re much pickier than I expected, which is a nuisance. I’ll see you again soon, Big Brother.”

And with that, Aka was gone.

The next second, Seiji felt his consciousness slipping away from him.

“My, that’s not good. It completely slipped my mind.”

Shiroshi’s voice finally sounded a little flustered, and Seiji groaned inwardly.

…I knew it.

*

He was dreaming of a Hell in which no flowers bloomed.

The darkness held even more darkness.

It was pitch black everywhere he looked, and he couldn’t see a thing.

What is this place? He walked and walked but didn’t feel as if he was getting anywhere. He might as well have been standing still.

Just then, with an abruptness unique to nightmares, something occurred to him.

Maybe it wasn’t that he couldn’t see anything. Maybe there wasn’t anything to see.

This darkness was most likely his very existence: empty, hollow, worthless. An endless expanse of nothing.

No home, no savings, no job, no lover—not even his only friend.

Itsumade*? How long?*

He heard a voice somewhere in the infinite darkness. Maybe it had been there all along and he just hadn’t noticed.

Was it laughing at him?

Cursing him?

…Calling him?

Unbidden, his feet turned toward the voice, and he was about to wander off in that direction when…

A white shape fluttered in front of him.

It's a butterfly, he thought.

He reached out, like a sinner in Hell grasping at a spider's thread.

Somehow it felt as if his fingertips had connected with someone else's warmth, and Seiji suddenly felt like crying.

*

Even after he opened his eyes, the world was dark.

…Huh?

He blinked a few times, and at last a familiar ceiling came into focus.

A moment later, Shiroshi's face bobbed into view.

"Oh, you're awake."

It was only when Seiji heard the voice above his head that he finally registered where he was: He'd been put to bed in his room.

After the incident…

He had a vague memory of Beniko putting him over her shoulder and carrying Seiji to the Rover Mini parked on the road. He must have blacked out entirely after that, though, because he could hardly remember anything about the rest.

His left eye was neatly covered by an eye patch, meaning his treatment must have gone off without a hitch. The pain had eased quite a bit as well, and Seiji gave a little sigh of relief.

"Um, sorry, but what time is it?"

"Nine in the evening. Beniko was sitting with you until a moment ago, but she has housework to take care of for tomorrow, so I traded places with her."

Ah. As nursing went, it seemed like they'd gone a bit overboard, but honestly, Seiji was grateful. It might not have been a huge, life-threatening injury, but it had felt pretty serious to him.

Maybe it was because he was short on blood, but his fingertips were still cold, and his whole body was damp with sweat, which made his hair cling to his forehead. He must have a fever, which also explained why his mind was even fuzzier than normal.

And more than anything—

"You were groaning in your sleep for quite some time. Does it still hurt?"

“Oh… A little.”

He really couldn’t tell Shiroshi he’d been moaning because of his dream.

Besides, it *did* still hurt. There was a dull, persistent ache and a gritty feeling in his eye, as if he’d gotten something in it. Both were annoying in the extreme.

“If the pain is too much, we can put in some anesthetic eyedrops. Let’s get you changed as well. Oh, and you should eat something if you feel you can,” Shiroshi said, handing him a glass of water.

Seiji looked over and saw a pitcher of water on the bedside table, presumably provided by Beniko.

Talk about five-star service.

“Thanks, that’s a huge help.”

Seiji’s flushed body rapidly cooled as the cold water trickled down his throat, and he felt alive again.

Come to think of it, if that knife had hit him in the wrong spot, Seiji could easily have been dead by now. Although, even then, a certain somebody might have cleared the matter away with a brief “My, my.”

“…If I died, I bet it wouldn’t even take you three days to forget about me, huh, Shiroshi?”

“Is paranoia a common side effect of eye drops?” Shiroshi asked, sounding genuinely perplexed.

Well, yes, being injured had left Seiji feeling a little pessimistic. He was aware.

“Now then, why don’t I peel you an apple? There’s no sense in calling Beniko for such a trifling matter.”

There were some small apples on a plate at the far end of the bedside table, along with a folding fruit knife.

“Huh? You know how to do that, Shiroshi?”

“Yes, although I leave all the kitchen work to Beniko. Would you like me to cut them into bunny rabbits?”

“…Squirrels, please.”

“You’re very like a Tibetan fox today, Seiji.”

His modest attempt at annoying Shiroshi had been returned in no time flat—and with change.

Shiroshi peeled the apple smoothly with a practiced hand, sliced it up, then casually speared a piece with a fork.

“In any case, I do hope you’ll get well soon.”

“Huh? You mean that?”

“Well, of course. Life would be very dull without you.”

He hadn’t expected them to, but Shiroshi’s words touched him. He figured it was at times like these that people became easy prey for con men.

“Thank you for the apple.”

Seiji took the plate and started eating the red and white bunnies with a fork, one by one. By the second bite he’d lost his appetite, most likely due to his fever, but he harnessed his inner glutton and managed to put away about half the apple.

“Um, so what ended up happening with Serina?”

“Frankly, there was nothing to be done. I made her forget any memories connected to this house; however, the rest of this affair isn’t something we should involve ourselves in.”

That was probably true.

It sounded cold, but the rest was for Serina to figure out herself.

Still… Seiji fell to thinking.

Shiroshi’s mind also seemed to be elsewhere.

“…She was like a *namanari*, wasn’t she?”

“Huh?”

“It’s a Noh mask,” Shiroshi told him. “If a *hannya* is a woman whose passions have driven her mad and turned her into an *oni*, then a *namanari* is the stage immediately before that: no longer human, but not yet a demon. They’re on the threshold, so to speak.”

“Oh, I see. She looked like a demon hag to me, though.”

“Heh-heh. I would imagine so. However, *oni* are more…”

Shiroshi trailed off midsentence. He was silent for a while, as if thinking about something, then said, “By the way. About that boy, Aka.”

“Ah! Is that damn little—or, um, Aka, I should say— Is he really your little brother?”

He’d claimed to be Sanmoto Gorouzaemon’s illegitimate child, but…

“That’s a very good question. *Hidarugami* did his bidding, so I do think either he’s descended from the Demon King as I am, or

he comes from a similar bloodline. However, if he *is* my younger brother…”

Shiroshi broke off, shaking his head in resignation.

“In any case, I’ve sent word to the appropriate party, so I should be receiving a reply soon. Whether I like it or not.”

Apparently, the “party” in question was someone Shiroshi didn’t much care for.

No—there was another, more urgent question here.

“Will my left eye go back to the way it was?” Seiji asked abruptly.

Almost imperceptibly, Shiroshi caught his breath. “You’ll need to use antibiotic eye drops and take medicine for a little while. The external wound should heal without scarring in two weeks at most. However—” He paused for a moment. “It might be best for you to anticipate a certain amount of visual impairment.”

Oh, he dodged that, thought Seiji.

It was possible that, in his own way, Shiroshi was being considerate by not answering the real question.

Itsumade? How long?

He could almost hear the call of that monstrous bird again. Its grating voice might very well have been Seiji asking himself the same question.

How long am I going to be able to stay here?

If he lost all, or even most of the vision in his left eye, his sight wasn’t all he’d lose. Since the power of the Mirror of Illumination was the reason Shiroshi had made him his assistant, Seiji would also inevitably be turned out of this house.

He really didn’t think they’d ask him to pay back the thirty-million-yen debt all at once, but that was entirely up to Shiroshi, who’d bought out his loans. And even if he was allowed to pay it back in installments, he’d still have to sell off his organs.

What am I going to do from here on out?

Seiji had lost the lease on his apartment ages ago, and he had as little to do with his parents as possible. When he’d called them for the first time in a while the other day, they’d said, “Our son is dead” and hung up on him. He suspected they’d mistaken him for a scammer—after all, he’d basically been half-missing ever since he’d fled his old place under the cover of night.

He no longer had anywhere in the world to go home to.

Still…

Even Seiji thought he was being inconsistent. Just a few months ago, the only thought on his mind had been how badly he wanted to get away from this job; he should have been thrilled if his troublesome left eye went back to “normal” and he got fired.

Yet for some reason…

“By the way, Seiji, why did you try to save the baby?”

“Huh?”

Apparently, Shiroshi was talking about his scuffle with Serina.

“Seeing you confront her alone was like watching a snail competing on the track at the Olympics. You must have been painfully aware that, had worse come to worst, you could have lost your life.”

…At least upgrade me to a green turtle.

“Um, how do I put this…? I thought, if it was between me or the baby, it should be the baby.”

When it came down to it, which of them should live? It wasn’t as if he’d gotten desperate or wanted to throw away his life—he’d just known that was what he’d had to do.

He’d lived all these years without managing to do a single thing right.

Back hip circles on the horizontal bar, multiplication, swimming, communication skills, the entrance exams, finding a job— Seiji had gotten through every important step by pretending not to see the hurdle he was supposed to overcome, fudging his way through life as if he were stubbornly riding a bike with a flat tire.

If the value of Seiji’s life was weighed against someone else’s, he doubted the scales would ever tip in his favor.

Besides.

“That Aka kid said something about how it’d be better if the baby was never born at all, but I just can’t see it that way.”

Those words could have been directed at Seiji himself.

He’d been cursed at, blamed, criticized, scolded—and every time, he’d plugged his ears and taken to his heels. Looking back on it now, that had pretty much been his whole life. Yet not once had he wished he’d never been born.

And, more than anything…

“Isn’t it too early to say whether that baby will really end up unhappy?”

When Seiji had shoved Serina away, she’d protected the baby. Even if that had been an involuntary, instinctive act, there might still be room for affection to grow from it.

For better or for worse, there was no way of knowing what the future held.

Yet it was that very uncertainty that might give meaning to being born.

“You really are uniquely *you*, Seiji,” Shiroshi said, letting out a short sigh.

He opened the paperback he’d been reading at the bookmark.

“If you were someone else, however, I don’t think I’d be here right now.”

Seiji was about to ask what Shiroshi meant when he noticed something.

He recognized the difficult-looking title of Shiroshi’s book; it was the one he’d been reading just before their shaved ice party. Back then, the bookmark had been near the middle, but now it was almost at the end.

Wait a second…

Right after Seiji had woken up, Shiroshi had said he’d traded places with Beniko “a moment ago.”

However, after that…

“You were groaning in your sleep for quite some time. *Does it still hurt?”*

Oh, I see.

If he’d been here beside him the whole time Seiji was wandering in the darkness—then that white butterfly might have been Shiroshi.

Mystery 2

Oni

Something feels weird here.

Muttering those words in his head for the umpteenth time, Seiji sipped his *hojicha*. They'd just finished breakfast—a Japanese-style menu featuring daikon mochi cakes filled with sakura shrimp that had been so tasty, he'd been left with a newfound respect for the humble radish.

Right now, he was looking at Shiroshi.

They'd been given dishes of peaches for dessert, but Shiroshi was just sitting there ignoring his, fork in hand, his gaze wandering aimlessly. If Seiji had stealthily reached in from the side and dribbled soy sauce all over those peaches, he suspected Shiroshi might have eaten them without even noticing.

He's been like this all the time lately.

A week had passed since the incident.

In the end, Seiji hadn't lost sight in his eye.

At first, he'd needed to put in eye drops and change the gauze pad five times a day, but the pain had gradually receded, and now all that remained was a scab on his left eyelid.

It had apparently affected his sight a little, but he'd always had 20/13 vision in both eyes, so that wasn't much of a problem. It might have negatively affected the power of the Mirror of Illumination, but at this point, it was anyone's guess.

As such, he'd thought that everything would go back to normal and he could resume his quiet, comfortable freeloading life, but… he'd been mistaken.

I bet it's because of that letter…

A week ago, Shiroshi had sent a question about Aka, the kid who'd claimed to be Sanmoto Gorouzaemon's illegitimate child, to the so-called appropriate party. A response had arrived the

very next day in the form of a faded sepia-toned photograph, and Shiroshi had been acting strange ever since.

What on earth had been in that photo? Seiji had no way to know. However, since then, Shiroshi had seemed distracted no matter what he was doing, as if he'd accidentally left half his heart somewhere else.

As if he was constantly thinking about one particular thing.

Is he worried about something?

Seiji would have loved to ask, but the odds were good that that "something" was Aka, which made this a family affair between the Demon King and his sons. Was it okay for a mere freeloader to poke his nose into something like that?

That said, he couldn't just ignore it. Right now, he was basically the equivalent of a dumb dog pacing anxiously around its sick master.

Oh, right—Beniko might know something.

Just as that idea occurred to him, Beniko entered the study. She was holding a letter in a white envelope.

"Here you are. Today's post."

"My, that's unusual. Thank you for your hard work."

From what Seiji had heard, all of the mail for the house was held at the post office, and Beniko went to retrieve it every day. He was deeply impressed with her work ethic.

"Um, Beniko, could I ask you about something later—?"

But Beniko cut him off before Seiji could finish.

"What seems to be the matter, Master Shiroshi?" There was a rare note of surprise in her voice.

Seiji turned back around and froze.

Shiroshi's face, which was pale to begin with, had gone so white, it might have belonged to a corpse.

"What—what's wrong?" Seiji asked, flustered.

Just then, something caught his eye: Shiroshi was holding the envelope Beniko had just brought in. Had its contents caused Shiroshi to react like this?

"Oh!"

A sheet of stationery fluttered out of the envelope.

Seiji promptly caught it and opened it, revealing words that seemed to have been written with a fountain pen.

Allow me to make an announcement:

On the nineteenth of August, a dismemberment will occur at Hotel Isola Bella. I promise this single night will spell the end of this Hell more beautiful than Heaven. I invite you to witness it.

The message was pretty cryptic.

However, for some reason, it sent a chill down Seiji's spine.

"Um, what's…?"

But before Seiji could finish his question, he was struck by a feeling that something was off.

Shiroshi wasn't looking at the stationery in Seiji's hand but at the envelope.

When Seiji peeked in from the side, he saw that the address had also been written using a fountain pen, in the same hand as the letter. It had been sent from somewhere in Nagasaki Prefecture. Taking a closer look, he realized the character for "prefecture" had been written as the old-fashioned, more complicated version, and the whole thing had a bit of a retro feel to it. The last part of the address read "Kiou Island, Hotel Isola Bella."

The sender's name was Riko Ayatsuji.

"It appears to be a written request. Though it could also be a letter of challenge," Shiroshi said hoarsely, in answer to Seiji's question.

The next moment…

Shiroshi raised his eyes from the envelope, and all the confusion that had been in them was gone. His smile looked like a white peony in bloom, so much so that Seiji suspected he'd been seeing things earlier.

"Now then, Seiji. Shall we descend into Hell on faraway Kyushu?"

And so, on August 19, Seiji and Shiroshi left for Nagasaki.

*

Now, if asked which season least suited Shiroshi, Seiji would probably have said summer. In fact, it was rare to find someone *this* incompatible with summer skies, distant thunderclouds, and fields of sunflowers.

And now…

On the observation deck of Nagasaki Airport, under a summer sky filled with white cumulonimbus clouds, Shiroshi sat paging through the travel guide Seiji had bought, looking for all the world like a bad composite photo.

Seiji could hear a group of foreign tourists crying out in delight, saying “Wow, a kimono!” and “That’s so cool!” accompanied by the shutter sounds of smartphone cameras. If Shiroshi negotiated, he’d probably be able to get some modeling fees out of this.

At five AM on August 19, before dawn had really broken, Beniko had handed a half-asleep Seiji their two suitcases, and they’d set out for Haneda Airport. Shiroshi had carried nothing, as if that was entirely to be expected.

If Seiji had been making the trip alone, it would have been a twenty-hour jam-packed schedule, facilitated by night buses and a Seishun 18 discount train ticket. He was with Shiroshi this time, though, so of course they traveled by air, and the trip took less than two hours. For both humans and supernaturals, deep pockets were a seriously handy thing to have.

They had a late breakfast at the airport during their layover.

Seiji felt as if he could’ve eaten Nagasaki *champon* forever. The dish was loaded up with a ridiculous amount of shrimp and squid, and the thick, chewy noodles intermingled with the savory broth that seemed to have picked up all the goodness of the ingredients.

“It’s so good, I wish Beniko could have had some,” Seiji inadvertently murmured.

“Shall we pick up a frozen version and ship it to her later? The Nagasaki *castella* looks good as well,” Shiroshi agreed quietly.

Seiji had assumed Beniko would be coming with them, but she’d had things to do that couldn’t be put off, so they’d been forced to split up.

“*Do take care. Please don’t do anything reckless*,” Shiroshi had urged her when they’d parted.

Maybe he’d sent her on some sort of special errand. This was Beniko they were talking about, though: Most things were probably a cakewalk for her.

“Now then, we’ll catch a connecting flight to Gotou-Fukue Airport, then continue on by water taxi.”

“Huh…? This place is way out there, isn’t it?”

Fukue, one of the Gotou Islands, was located in the west of Nagasaki Prefecture off the coast of Kyushu, and their destination, Kiou Island, was another fifteen kilometers beyond that. It would take a full fifty minutes by boat to get there.

That meant Seiji had no choice but to ready himself. When they reached the islands, he bought peppermint gum to chew to take his mind off the trip. He also took anti-nausea medication, so he went into the boat trip fully prepared…

But it still wasn’t long before they saw a Merlion hurling off the side of the boat.

“If we set your face with plaster, I think you’d make a fine fountain just as you are.”

“…If you’re going to stand there and watch the show, could you at least pay for a ticket?”

Seiji had been born into a family of fishermen, but he’d made it to the age of twenty-three without managing to conquer his seasickness. He’d positively mastered the art of throwing up. He crawled to the side of the boat, stuck his head out over the ocean, and demonstrated his own unique technique for roughly thirty minutes.

He’d taken a bigger dose of anti-nausea medicine than usual, and perhaps it had done the trick, because ten minutes before they were due to disembark, Seiji managed to start walking upright again.

“I…I made it back alive.”

“My, welcome back. That was a captivating display of regurgitation.”

As Seiji went to stand beside Shiroshi on the rear deck, holding on to the railing, Shiroshi ruffled his hair as if to say, “there, there.”

The boat chugged along under the bright sunlight, kicking up white waves, and seabirds cried out high in the sky. It was every inch the picture of a summer resort.

“You come from a port town, don’t you, Seiji? Do you miss the ocean?”

“Um, honestly, not at all.” Most of his memories of boats, pools, and the ocean involved somebody shoving him into the water half in fun, so all he really remembered was the pain of getting water up his nose. If it had been “half in fun,” then what was the other half? Attempted murder?

“Come to think of it, the address said ‘Kiou Island.’ Is Hotel Isola Bella a resort hotel?”

“A former hotel, technically. Kiou Island was originally uninhabited, but now it’s one of the nation’s smallest populated islands…”

Apparently, Hotel Isola Bella had begun as a luxury, members-only place.

Back at the height of the bubble era, someone had invested the jaw-dropping sum of thirty billion yen into developing the rock-strewn, deserted land that had been Kiou Island into a resort. It had received extensive media coverage when it first opened, but business had gone downhill when the bubble economy collapsed. It didn’t help that it was a hard place to get to, either, and between that, a boiler accident, and other strokes of bad luck, its career had been astonishingly brief.

“It was abandoned for a time after that, yet it seems to have become tremendously popular among urban exploration enthusiasts. They call it ‘the most beautiful ruin in the world.’ I’m told it’s also served as a movie location.”

“Huh… Whatever floats your boat, I guess.”

“Heh-heh. Well, in Italian, ‘Isola Bella’ does mean ‘beautiful island.’ ”

According to Shiroshi, Isola Bella was an island on the famously scenic Lake Maggiore—a body of water in the Lake District of northern Italy near the Swiss border—and that island was owned by the aristocratic House of Borromeo.

Hotel Isola Bella had apparently been modeled on its Italian namesake—or, more accurately, on the island’s Palazzo Borromeo, a renowned masterpiece of Baroque architecture, and its pyramid-shaped Italianate Baroque garden.

“Isola Bella was also a mere rock-strewn islet once. Carlo III, a Borromean count, built a paradise on the water there as a present for his wife, Isabella.”

Being a doting husband was genuinely impressive when you took it that far.

“The Borromeo countship is also known for its collection of marionettes, and curiously enough, the individual who purchased Hotel Isola Bella was a celebrated dollmaker.”

Kouji Ayatsuji—the father of Riko Ayatsuji, who’d sent that letter.

The second son of a wealthy family, Kouji had purchased Hotel Isola Bella to use as a residence and studio twenty years ago. After two years of renovation work, he’d moved there with his wife, Hari, a former ballerina, and their only daughter, Riko, who was two years old at the time.

“His official title was ‘dollmaker,’ but the man in question referred to himself as ‘a living doll artisan.’ ”

“What do you mean ‘living dolls’?”

“They were a form of public entertainment that won popularity in areas such as Nanba and Asakusa from the closing years of the Tokugawa shogunate to the Meiji era. As the name suggests, the dolls were made to look so much like real humans that one might have thought they were alive, and they were used to perform scenes from plays or to reenact murders that had captured the public’s interest.”

So basically, they were like super-realistic, life-sized action figures?

“It was considered a lowbrow form of entertainment at the time and was done away with as Japan modernized. Yet Kouji’s works have won international acclaim for their ‘hyper-realism that closes in on the essence of humanity.’ How the world has changed…,” Shiroshi said, as if he felt it keenly.

Kouji had always drawn attention among fringe circles as a prodigious talent known only to those in the know, but a certain avant-garde play had boosted his popularity at a stroke.

The performance had been inspired by an Edogawa Ranpo essay, and the director had pulled off a one-man show by having a living doll identical to the leading actor appear as his twin, with the actor playing both roles.

Apparently, some members of the audience had mistaken the pair onstage for actual twins.

“There were frequent moments when even I couldn’t tell the doll from the actor. That doll really is more human than a live person,” the director had said afterward.

Kouji’s works were currently bought and sold at the jaw-dropping price of fifty million yen per doll. This was because…

“When he first moved to Hotel Isola Bella, Kouji invited celebrated persons of culture to the island and held artist salons practically every day. However, when he turned forty, he abruptly announced his retirement, saying, ‘My greatest masterpiece is my beloved daughter, Riko. The rest are just shoddy imitations.’ ”

“…That’s completely nuts.”

“Yes, those around him were initially skeptical as well. However, shockingly, Kouji destroyed all the dolls still in his possession and retired completely.”

Incredibly, he’d been as good as his word.

Yet Kouji had always been a sociable person, and even after his retirement, he continued to open Hotel Isola Bella for salons. For the next two years, people praised it as a mecca for artists and collectors, and as a paradise on the ocean, until—

“Ten years ago, misfortune suddenly struck the hotel. Hari, Kouji’s wife, died from a fall down the stairs.”

And the tragedy hadn’t ended there.

“Unfortunately, Riko witnessed the fall, and the shock unbalanced her mind. Rumor has it that even now, a decade after the incident, her symptoms remain unchanged.”

“I don’t know quite what to say. That’s, uh…completely horrible.”

Tragedy was really the only word for it. It had to have been a heavy emotional blow for Kouji.

“Indeed. Kouji’s personality changed dramatically after that; he stopped associating with his artist friends and eventually developed a severe aversion to people in general. Then, two years ago, from what I hear, he dismissed nearly all of his servants and began to keep his face hidden… Heh-heh-heh. That place certainly has its fair share of skeletons in the closet.”

Was it his imagination, or had Shiroshi’s tone taken a sharp turn into “ghost story” mode?

“In truth, all of that was merely a preamble. There’s a certain eerie tale about Hotel Isola Bella that has its origins in Hari’s

accident.”

“Um, I’m good. I’ve heard enough.”

“It began half a year before the accident—”

Having had his right to refuse summarily revoked, Seiji glared ineffectively at Shiroshi.

But then…

“My, what a pity. The rest will have to wait.”

“Huh?”

“It appears we’ve arrived.”

Shiroshi lifted his index finger in a single smooth motion.

When Seiji looked out to where he was pointing, an involuntary “Oh!” escaped him.

While his attention had been elsewhere, they’d come within a few hundred meters of their destination. The small island was shaped like a round slab of stone, and most of it was monopolized by Hotel Isola Bella.

No—that wasn’t right. It was more like the island itself was an enormous hotel. Seeing it for the first time, it looked like a fortified European mansion floating on the emerald sea.

“I-it’s incredible.”

“Heh-heh. Now if only a storm rolls in tonight, we’ll have the perfect stage.”

…He wasn’t planning to keep trying to drag this toward the horror genre, was he?

Still, there wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and the sunlight just kept getting more intense. They’d had a run of fine weather recently, so a storm seemed pretty unlikely.

When the boat was within a few dozen meters of the island, it turned, sketching a curve of white wake on the ocean’s surface, and circled halfway around the island, running parallel to its sheer cliffs. Finally, it entered a small inlet that appeared to have been worn away by the waves.

The boat coasted past seagulls perched on the piles of the narrow pier and moored.

Seiji lugged both his and Shiroshi’s luggage down the ramp. Meanwhile, its job complete, the water taxi promptly turned back to Fukue Island.

“Ah, it appears someone’s come to meet us.”

“Huh? We didn’t call ahead or anything, though.”

But it was true.

A gentleman walked toward them down a staircase carved out of the white stone. He was approaching old age and looked a lot like a butler. The bridge of his nose was straight and prominent, and there was a slight gray cast to his eyes, making Seiji think he was half or a quarter Japanese. At a glance, his salt-and-pepper hair looked silver.

“I regret to inform you that this island is private property. No unauthorized entry, nor photography, is permitted. Please leave; I will call a boat for you.”

The man’s tone was mild, but they were still being told to scram. Seiji guessed that, since this had been a popular site at one point, they were probably used to being gate-crashed by urban explorers.

Shiroshi took a deliberate step forward and gave a small bow. “I apologize for the sudden intrusion. My name is Shiroshi Saijou. I run a consultation office of sorts in Tokyo. One of this island’s residents, a Miss Riko, sent a request for my services by post the other day.”

“A request…? From the young mistress?”

“Yes, it instructed me to come to this address on the nineteenth of August. I’m sorry for visiting unannounced; I didn’t know the telephone number.”

The terrifying part was that he hadn’t told a single lie.

“Would it be possible for me to see Miss Riko?”

The only response to the second question was a pensive silence.

Finally…

“This appears to be a complicated matter, so let’s discuss it indoors. Come this way, please.”

Apparently, they’d made it past the first checkpoint. Seiji stealthily exchanged a high-five with Shiroshi, and they followed the elderly gentleman’s receding back up the white stairs.

And then…

“Oh, wow!”

The moment they stepped through the front door into the entrance hall, a delighted cry escaped Seiji.

They had found themselves in a high-ceilinged atrium. The floor was a tile mosaic in a beautiful geometric pattern, and the

domed ceiling and its supporting pillars were painted a breathtakingly ethereal pale blue. A gallery ran all the way around the second floor, both ends meeting at a grand staircase directly in front of them.

Light streamed in through parallel rows of windows on both floors, and delicate white patterns—"stucco ornamentation," according to Shiroshi—elevated the room's beauty to the realm of fantasy. The space itself was a work of art.

"I see; it appears to have been based on the Salone Nuovo of the Palazzo Borromeo. The original was designed as a venue for musical performances and balls."

"Yeah, it feels like it… Huh? What's that door?"

Seiji pointed at a corner of the gallery. In the row of evenly spaced white doors was one painted black.

"My, my, very well spotted. That door leads to the annex; a relic of the building's hotel days that houses all of the guest rooms in a separate wing. I hear the family lives here in the main building."

"I see. You really did your homework on this place, huh?"

"Heh-heh-heh. All credit goes to Beniko."

Ignoring the whispered conversation behind him, the elderly gentleman turned to the right and opened a door under an overhanging section of the staircase, revealing a parlor.

There was a fireplace at the back of the room directly opposite the door, with two armchairs in front of it. A couch upholstered in red velvet faced the chairs across a table inlaid with ivory.

A short while later…

"Forgive me for not greeting you properly until now. My name is Junichirou Shimomura. I see to the needs of Master Kouji, the owner of this island."

Once he'd introduced himself, the gentleman served them orange juice. It was apparently made here, and the incredibly fresh juice mixed with finely crushed ice to create a drink that was almost like sorbet. Frankly, getting seconds of this was mandatory.

"It's delicious! Thank you so much!"

"I'm glad it's to your liking."

Shimomura's gentle smile made Seiji feel oddly close to him. The man seemed to have a knack for setting strangers at ease on

their first meeting.

Then the gray eyes that had focused on Seiji blinked.

“By the way, who is this?” he asked.

It took a little while for Shiroshi to answer.

“My assistant, Seiji Tohno.”

…He forgot my job title.

“You said you ran a consultation office. Does that mean you provide paid counseling?”

“No, it’s free of charge. Think of it as an outsourced business that provides a public service. I, myself, am practically a volunteer.”

Granted, the outsourcer was Great King Enma of Hell…

“By the way,” Shiroshi continued, “have you worked here long? You seem to be responsible for the rest of the staff.”

“No, I am the only servant. I have lived and worked here for about eight years now.”

“What? No way! This mansion is huge!” Seiji interrupted without thinking.

Shimomura chuckled kindly. “It certainly is. Most of the time, it’s just me. When we have overnight guests, as we do today, I hire temporary part-time workers—”

“Oh, are relatives of Mr. Kouji staying here?” Shiroshi said off-handedly, and Shimomura suddenly went quiet.

He cleared his throat and sat up straighter, evidently thinking he’d said too much.

“If you don’t mind, may I see the request the young mistress sent you?”

“Yes, of course. However, I’m obligated to keep the actual content of her request confidential.” With that caveat, Shiroshi handed him the empty envelope.

Shimomura scrutinized it, before returning it to Shiroshi with a slight shake of his head.

“I beg your pardon, but I don’t think this was written by the young mistress. That said, the postmark certainly is from this area. You mentioned having come all the way from Tokyo, and although I cannot attest to the sender’s intentions, I believe this may have been some kind of malicious prank.”

There was sympathy in his voice.

It had to be said that only complete idiots would have flown all the way down to Kyushu on the strength of a single written request.

“Just to be sure, may I meet with Miss Riko?”

“…Unfortunately, I’m afraid that might be difficult.”

“Oh? Why is that?” Shiroshi asked, cocking his head to the side.

Shimomura lowered his gray eyes. “The shock of her mother’s death left the young mistress in a dissociative stupor that has persisted for the past decade.”

“A disso…? What?” Seiji’s voice cracked at having that technical term suddenly thrown at him.

“It’s a type of dissociative disorder that occurs when the patient suffers an emotional shock beyond what they can bear. Someone who’s witnessed a murder or an accident, or been involved in a disaster, for example, may temporarily cut themselves off from reality to protect themselves from the shock,” Shiroshi explained in a low voice, as usual. “Of this family of disorders, ‘stupor’ refers to a state in which the patient fails to react to any external stimuli whatsoever. That includes not only the voices of those around them, but things like light and sound. Naturally, they aren’t able to speak or move, either.”

Wouldn’t that make them a genuine living doll?

“I see. That makes Miss Riko’s condition quite clear.” Shiroshi nodded, then turned back to Shimomura. “Is her attending physician on the mainland?”

“No, they’re here— I am he.”

No way.

“Before coming here, I had my own psychiatric clinic in Tokyo. Now I tend to the needs of both family members as their physician.”

That was a surprise. Shimomura looked as if he’d been born to be a butler, but apparently, his official title was “doctor.”

“I apologize, but as their physician, I cannot allow you to see either of them.”

“No, I understand. I’m very sorry to have disturbed you.”

Unexpectedly, Shiroshi backed down without a fight.

Shimomura exhaled, looking relieved. “In that case, I will call for a boat to take you home at once. Wait here, if you please.” He

bowed and quickly left the room.

If they got kicked out now, this whole trip would have been for nothing.

But just then, Shiroshi tugged on Seiji's shirt.

"Now then, Seiji, shall we borrow their restrooms?"

"Huh? 'We'?"

"Yes, it should be easier to find if we're both looking for them —the restrooms *and* Riko."

Aha. In other words, they'd be searching the house on the pretext of looking for the bathroom.

Roger that. He stood up, and the two of them began to explore Hotel Isola Bella.

*

Returning to the entrance hall, they climbed the great staircase, heading for the second floor. The railing was carved with spiral curlicues; its beauty was captivating, and somehow warped.

"The name of the Baroque style was taken from *barroco*, the Portuguese word for a misshapen pearl. It's known for its lavish use of curves, which do give it a rather twisted impression," Shiroshi said as he climbed the stairs.

Seiji followed half a step behind.

"Um, shouldn't we show Shimomura the actual letter, too?"

"Oh? Whatever for?"

"If the postmark was from around here, the sender could be connected to this island, right? Shimomura might know who it is."

"You did well to notice that, Seiji, this being you we're talking about. I'm impressed." And Shiroshi did sound impressed. It was the sort of tone you'd use with a pet dog the first time it caught a Frisbee. "I don't think it would be wise to place too much trust in Shimomura, though."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Something about his expression has been nagging at me. And I don't believe we can completely rule out the possibility that it was sent by Riko herself just yet."

"Huh? But she's…"

“We’ll see about that. It’s possible that Riko returned to her senses long ago and is only pretending to be a living doll in order to deceive those around her.”

“B-but why would she do that?”

“I really couldn’t say. However, if there are circumstances that might endanger her life, she would have nowhere to run on this island.”

A phrase from the letter went through Seiji’s mind: *this Hell more beautiful than Heaven*.

Every inch of this building was dominated by the aesthetics of its owner. In a way, the island itself was a work of art—but was it also an inescapable prison?

If something really does happen here tonight…

Honestly, Seiji wasn’t even sure that letter had really been a request, but maybe the situation was more dire than he’d imagined. In which case, was the “dismemberment” it mentioned —?

“…Hmm?”

A thought suddenly occurred to him.

Seiji had assumed that this request had been mediated by someone connected to a past case, like with what had happened with the *nue* incident. However, if Riko hadn’t left the island in ten years…

How did she get the house’s address in the first place?

Just as Seiji was puzzling over that…

“…My, my, how incredible.”

“Whoa! What a view!”

There was a window on the landing of the staircase, which overlooked the garden.

“The pyramid-shaped Baroque garden is known as the *Teatro Massimo*, meaning ‘the greatest theater’ in Italian. A wonder akin to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, isn’t it?”

There was deep admiration in Shiroshi’s voice.

The terraced garden had an astonishing ten levels. Each tier was decorated with pillars and sculptures, as if it were a theater stage, to create what looked like a giant temple. The highest level was about 30 meters above the ground. One could see all the way to the horizon from that height, and a statue of a rearing unicorn stood atop the garden, looking as if it were about to race up to

Heaven. According to Shiroshi, this was the symbol of the House of Borromeo.

"The unicorn is a mythical beast that has appeared in the heraldic emblems of Europe for centuries. However, it's said to have had a savage, arrogant nature, and that it perished in the Great Flood because it was expelled from Noah's Ark."

"Huh. You'd never know it to look at them."

So it had been like a more majestic version of Giant from *Doraemon*?

Shiroshi's eyes rose to the blue expanse of sky above the tip of the statue's horn.

"It seems we'll have a storm soon."

No way, thought Seiji. It must have shown in his face, because Shiroshi beckoned him to come closer, then pushed up the sash of a small ventilation window in the corner.

"Wagh!"

Seiji backed up fast, having taken a blast of wind straight in the face.

At some point, the weather had turned heavy and damp, and the wind had begun to howl. Looking out at the lake on the other side of the garden, Seiji could see rough white waves on the surface.

The storm was very close.

"Wh-why'd it suddenly…? Huh? A typhoon?!"

After hastily shutting the little window, Seiji checked the weather app on his phone and yelped.

Incredibly, a large typhoon was on its way. A storm that had been predicted to make landfall in China had taken a sudden, unexpected turn and would descend on Kyushu as soon as that night.

Come to think of it, when they'd boarded the water taxi, the captain's face had been weirdly grim. Had that been because of the storm?

"Yes, it seems our voyage was very nearly canceled. Still, if the weather's turned this suddenly, there may be someone close by bringing the rain," Shiroshi said calmly.

"Oh, yeah, right," Seiji retorted, but just then—

"That's why I'm telling you to just let me see Riko already!"

Out of nowhere, they heard an angry yell from one of the doors lining the gallery—the one directly above the parlor. There seemed to be some sort of an argument going on; Shimomura was standing with his back to the door, shielding it, while a young man yelled at him.

He seemed to be in his early twenties, like Seiji, and was dressed in skinny jeans and a shirt that draped loosely around the neck. It was a fashion-forward look apparently called "salon style," and he wore it well. Between that and his height, the man looked like a model or an actor, at first glance.

"…Huh?"

"What is it?"

"It might just be my imagination, but that guy looks really familiar."

That said, there was no way Seiji had ever met him before. If they were on the savanna, the difference between their two species would be as great as that of a lion and a naked mole rat.

Although the young man's face would ordinarily have been called handsome, right now his nose was wrinkled in a snarl like a vicious dog's. He wasn't the sort of guy Seiji wanted to get to know very well.

"As I have told you several times before, as her physician, I cannot allow you to see her."

There was cold rejection in Shimomura's voice. He seemed like a completely different man from the one they'd met.

"Oh yeah? Then I'll just camp out here until you can. 'You must accept any member of the family who wishes to stay on the island.' That's what the old man's will said, right?"

"That is true. However, as you were disowned by Master Kenjirou, I highly doubt you are qualified to claim membership in this family."

"Tch! Seriously with that shit?"

A will? "Master Kenjirou"? What's going on here?

"Kenjirou Ayatsuji— That would be Kouji's father."

Shiroshi had quietly seated himself in a corner of the landing, out of sight of the arguing pair. So naturally, Seiji squatted beside him.

"I mentioned that Kouji was from a wealthy family, didn't I?"

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure you said he was the second son."

“Kenjirou was a great man who, in the span of a single generation, built the family business from a small factory into one of the country’s leading general contractors. He was still working right up until last year, even though he was past eighty, but he had a stroke and passed away at the beginning of the year.”

In accordance with his long-standing will, Kenjirou’s vast assets were passed down to his rightful heirs, which included Hotel Isola Bella.

“No matter how famous Kouji was as an artist, his personal finances were limited. Kenjirou had been his source of funds and the legal owner of this island; Kouji had simply been its live-in caretaker.”

Now that he’d inherited it, the island belonged to Kouji, free and clear. However…

“In what is known as a ‘conditional bequest,’ a specific condition is imposed upon the inheritor. If they do not fulfill these obligations, the inheritance itself is annulled. In Kouji’s case, this seems to have been to accept any family member who wishes to stay here.”

Which is how he’d found himself saddled with a troublesome guest who wouldn’t leave.

“That is Kazusa Ayatsuji, Riko’s cousin. If I recall, he’s a fashion designer.”

“Oh!”

“What is it?”

“I remember now! I’m pretty sure he was getting flamed online a while back.”

When he tried searching “Kazusa Ayatsuji” on his smartphone, Seiji got a number of hits on news sites. All of them were entertainment gossip articles.

Two years ago, in a project orchestrated by a major entertainment agency, a model exclusively affiliated with a men’s fashion magazine had teamed up with a young fashion designer to launch a new clothing line. That designer had been Kazusa.

At the time, the team-up was widely reported as “a miraculous collaboration between two prodigious talents,” partly because both partners looked great on TV. For a time, they had been so popular that they’d exhibited at Tokyo Fashion Week, and their

first and second stores opened in rapid succession in the best district in central Tokyo. It had seemed like smooth sailing at first, but then…

"They got mocked on sites like Twitter for charging ten thousand yen for a T-shirt and having designs that were too bizarre for everyday wear. Then, when things were starting to look bad, Kazusa's partner, the model, was suspected of having an affair…"

And sales had taken a nosedive.

The model had made excuses, saying that he was "just an adviser" and that he hadn't been involved in management or the design work, and he'd disappeared from the public eye.

The brand never recovered, and in the end, it effectively went bankrupt.

"Uh… I hear they had a pretty good reputation overseas, though. Like, their clothes were chosen for the wardrobe of the lead actor in a popular drama—that sort of thing."

Management skills aside, Kazusa must have had actual talent as a designer.

According to his bio, he'd won a newcomer's prize that was considered the gateway to success for young designers while he was still in design school. That, as well as his looks, were what had caught talent agencies' attention—though it felt as if they'd put him in a doomed boat made of mud, which had gotten mobbed and dragged under…

"Why does he want to see Riko, though?" Seiji asked.

"I couldn't say. If he's having financial difficulties, he may be after her money; rumor has it that Riko inherited more than one hundred million yen."

That was a ludicrous sum. In that case, was Shimomura toughing it out alone to keep that money-hungry undesirable away from Riko?

Just then…

"Wh-what is that?!"

Two figures had appeared on the floor below, and Seiji stared at them in shock.

One was an enormous crow monster with a white skeletal beak and round black eyes. Its huge frame was covered with jet-black feathers, and it was easily over 180 centimeters tall.

He'd just assumed he was looking at a sinner's yokai form, but —

"…It appears to be a costume."

It was as Shiroshi said; when Seiji looked closely, he saw that the white beak was actually a wax mask, and the eyes were just eyeholes. The figure was wearing a jet-black ankle-length robe, as well as a brimmed hat and leather gloves of the same color. With an outfit like that combined with their very un-Japanese height, it was an enigma that would look suspicious wherever it went.

However, what had truly startled Seiji was the girl in the wheelchair.

Her vacant eyes were as still and clear as glass, making her look like a genuine antique doll. She wore a short-sleeved summer dress edged with delicate antique lace, and her beauty was positively inhuman.

She was a single white rose.

"That must be Kouji Ayatsuji and his daughter, Riko," Shiroshi said, bringing Seiji back to reality with a jolt.

I see. So that's her…

Kouji—who had once been an internationally renowned artist—had called this girl his "greatest masterpiece" and had personally destroyed all the works he still had with him. It was an outlandish tale, to be sure—yet there was a magic to her appearance that made it seem credible. Although her features held a maturity suitable for her age, her body could have belonged to a prepubescent girl and stubbornly seemed to have refused to grow.

That said, what he was really curious about was—

"Uh… Is Kouji cosplaying as something?"

"*Il Medico della Peste*—a common costume at Venice's masked carnival. It's based on the traditional clothing of a plague doctor who specialized in treating sufferers of the Black Death in medieval Europe."

"Huh. He looks more like Death-death than a doctor."

If he'd run into that on a dark street, bolting would have been his only option.

"Heh-heh. Saint Charles, who became the Archbishop of Milan, was a member of the House of Borromeo. He was a great man

who worked to save those afflicted with the plague; that may be who Kouji is channeling here.”

Still, no matter how much of an antisocial eccentric Kouji was, covering himself from head to toe with a mask and robe seemed downright pathological.

Seiji blinked, and the next moment—

“…Huh?”

That mask, as pale as bleached bone, had transformed into the face of a snarling, white-furred wolf. Perched on its head like a hat was a shallow iron pot.

Just then.

“Riko!” Kazusa suddenly shouted, having noticed the two figures downstairs.

He made to run toward the great staircase, but Shimomura held him back. The young man struggled, trying to shake him off, but Shimomura was taller, and Kazusa couldn’t break free.

“Argh, dammit, lemme go! Riko! Hey, Riko! Can you hear me?!”

Huh ? Seiji blinked.

There was something desperate in Kazusa’s voice as he called out to Riko.

Maybe he’s not actually after her inheritance…

Could there be some other urgent situation here?

Then…

Kouji had been staring up at Kazusa the whole time, but he shifted his grip on the handles of the wheelchair and started back the way they’d come.

“All right. Now we know where Riko is. Let’s continue our search, shall we?”

“O-okay.”

After that whispered exchange, Seiji and Shiroshi tiptoed down the great staircase, then hastily left the entrance hall behind them.

*

“…I see. So it was Kaji-ga-baba?”

As always, once Seiji had told him what he’d seen, Shiroshi identified it quite easily.

“It looked kind of funny, though. That iron pot on its head…”

“Heh-heh. It’s actually a terrifying yokai. Kaji-ga-baba is a story handed down in the city of Muroto, in Kouchi Prefecture. It’s similar to the tales of Yasaburou-baba and Koike-baba, and its various incarnations are told throughout Japan. It falls into the ‘thousand wolves’ story archetype.”

Long ago…

A pregnant woman was crossing a mountain pass when she suddenly went into labor near an ancient tree known as the childbirth cedar. A passing courier came to her aid, and they took shelter in a tree; however, when night fell, they found themselves surrounded by a pack of wolves.

The wolves formed a ladder by climbing onto each other’s backs and tried to attack the pair, but the courier fought back bravely with his short sword. Having failed in their assault, a cry went up from the wolves: “Call Kaji-ga-baba of Sakihama.”

Soon, a white-furred wolf appeared wearing a shallow iron pot on its head.

“Oh, I get it. The pot’s there to block the sword.”

In other words, it was a jury-rigged helmet.

“Indeed. However, the courier’s short sword cracked the pot in two, leaving a deep wound in the head of the white wolf, and it fled with its underlings. The next morning, when the courier followed the bloodstains it had left on the road—”

Shiroshi abruptly broke off. He was silent for a little while, seemingly deep in thought, then said:

“…That’s a problem.”

“Huh? What is?”

“If the yokai you saw was Kaji-ga-baba, then the situation may be more troublesome than I’d anticipated.”

“Um, what do you—? Whoa!”

Shiroshi had stopped walking so suddenly that Seiji almost ran into him. He was gazing at a door with a carving on it: a design featuring a unicorn and books.

“It’s probably this room.”

He turned the doorknob to reveal a small, rectangular room. The door was near the far right corner of the carpeted room, and a grandfather clock with a swaying brass pendulum stood against the nearest end wall.

And…

“I see. So it really was a library.”

The walls were lined with bookshelves that went all the way to the ceiling.

Weirdly, the spines were almost obsessively uniform, and none of them showed a title. At first glance, their thick, impressive leather bindings made them look as if they could be an encyclopedia set or the complete works of a particular author.

However…

“Oh, yes, that’s what they are.” Putting out a hand, Shiroshi took one of the books from the shelf and opened it, revealing pages that were as blank as a brand-new notebook.

“They’re what’s known as faux books. And custom-made, at that. That is to say, the entire library is purely ornamental.”

“Huh… Right. Talk about all style and no substance.”

And then.

“Uh, so, was there something in here that you—? Agh!”

Seiji had been gazing restlessly around the room when he’d suddenly jumped and tensed up.

It was a mirror.

At the other end of the room, on the wall opposite the clock, there was a full-length mirror. It was set in a long, thin, rectangular frame, and it reflected the carpeted floor and the bookshelves on the walls.

And…

…*I hate this.*

Seiji was reflected there as well, from head to toe, so that the grandfather clock was hidden behind him. It might be because he’d accepted his atonement from Shiroshi, but Seiji looked like himself instead of like a yokai. Due to his past trauma, however, he still disliked mirrors. A chill went down his spine, and he hastily tried to put some distance between himself and the glass, when—

“So this is the rumored mirror.”

“Dwaaah!”

“Heh-heh-heh. That was my imitation of Takamura.”

“…Please, just don’t.”

Shiroshi slowly walked up to the mirror and pressed a palm to it.

“We spoke of it on the boat, if you recall. I mentioned that Hotel Isola Bella has a ghost story associated with that fatal fall ten years ago. The star of that story is this mirror.”

Weird. It looks perfectly normal, Seiji thought.

“Um, did it reflect a ghost or something?”

“Heh-heh. Quite the opposite, in fact: What it should have reflected wasn’t there.”

According to Shiroshi…

Half a year before Hari’s death, Kouji had made a fuss about how he’d managed to take a “spirit photograph,” and had handed out copies of the photo to his friends. It was a picture of Hari standing in front of this mirror in the library, taken from behind her at an angle.

However, all the mirror had shown was the carpet, the bookshelves, and the grandfather clock, which should have been obscured by Hari’s reflection. Her reflection was nowhere to be seen, as if she’d turned invisible.

“At the time, everyone seemed to assume it was one of Kouji’s pranks. They thought he must have had the photo doctored by an expert to surprise his friends.”

“Huh… Why would he go to all that trouble, though?”

“Apparently, he was always fond of pranks. He even said about Hotel Isola Bella, ‘I’ve built a secret room somewhere in this mansion. If anyone finds it, I’ll cede the position of caretaker to them.’ ”

That’s crazy.

“Heh-heh-heh. Granted, it sounds as though almost no one took him seriously.”

Yet the situation changed dramatically when Hari died six months later.

“A rumor began to circulate that the spirit photograph had predicted the misfortune that was about to befall her, and this ‘death-auguring mirror’ unexpectedly became the focus of attention.”

After the accident, Kouji had been inundated with requests for interviews, but he stubbornly refused them all. He also destroyed every last copy of the photograph.

However, several months later, one of the photos he’d given to his friends was published in a weekly magazine. Kouji had

objected fiercely, and it had finally developed into an uproar that got all copies of that issue pulled from stores.

"There isn't a single copy of the photo left, then?"

"It seems not. I requested a search of secondhand book dealers, thinking I might at least manage to acquire a copy of the magazine. But its circulation was small to begin with, and the publisher had gone bankrupt."

If Beniko hadn't been able to find it, there probably wasn't anything to find.

Shiroshi leaned in for a closer look and began examining the mirror. Apparently, that ghost story was still on his mind.

Seiji stood there at a loss, having trouble finding something safe to look at, when—

"Would you care for some coffee?"

Someone beside him suddenly offered Seiji a cup.

"Oh, thanks." He took it on reflex, then realized who he'd just spoken to.

It was Aka.

"Waaah!"

"Boy, are you dense. Wouldn't you normally notice the moment someone offered you a drink?" The boy gave a musical little laugh. For some reason, he was dressed like a waiter in a formal-looking white shirt and bartender's vest, though he still wore his newsboy cap with the crimson peony.

"Wow, fancy meeting you here, though! I've been working on this island for a couple of weeks now, after I saw an ad for part-timers in a local newspaper. Who would've thought we'd run into each other—?"

"A *shoukera*?" Shiroshi interrupted.

Aka blinked, then held up both hands in surrender, sticking his tongue out with a mischievous giggle.

"You figured it out, huh? That's right; I've been keeping an eye on you. I knew you'd be coming here on the nineteenth of August, so I got to the island ahead of you," the boy confessed.

Uh, if I remember right, a shoukera *is…*

Seiji had seen it in Toriyama Sekien's *The Illustrated Demon Horde's Night Parade*. It was a yokai that looked sort of human, sort of like a demon, and sort of like something out of the original *Alien*. The illustration in the book had shown it clinging to a tiled

roof with sharp, hawklike talons, peeking into a house through a skylight.

When he'd read the description, Seiji had thought that it basically sounded like a ridiculously good stalker, so it probably did make a terrific spy.

"If you two are here, there's going to be some sort of incident, right? I can't wait. For an assistant hopeful like me, it's the perfect marketing opportunity."

His smile was the picture of innocence at first glance, yet it had the same chill to it as that of a grade-school kid enjoying himself drowning an anthill in the park. The boy was a psychopath.

And then…

"Why do you wish to be my assistant in the first place?" Shiroshi asked.

"Ha-ha! That's obvious: So people will acknowledge me as your brother, and by extension, as the son of Sanmoto Gorouzaemon." Aka gave a playful shrug. "My mother's a supernatural, but she can't provide me with the social backing I need. However, you're the heir; if I was your assistant, I'd get to be your close attendant when you win the throne someday. Your current assistant is a human, though, and none too bright, at that. You think I wouldn't want to steal his job, even if I had to kill him to get it?"

His smile held malice and contempt—as well as hatred and jealousy.

Yet a moment later, Aka's expression returned to normal, and he bowed primly.

"All right, I need to get back to work. Oh, and Mr. Shimomura was looking for you. You should probably head back to the parlor. Enjoy your stay."

The boy promptly turned on his heel and headed cheerfully for the door.

Suddenly…

"Isn't there something you should say to me?" Shiroshi called after him. Strangely, the end of the sentence sounded slightly husky, and the emotion beneath his words sounded a little like a plea to Seiji.

However.

“No, Brother, there’s nothing,” Aka said flatly, tilting his head as if he was perplexed.

“Really, nothing at all.”

*

The storm was right on their doorstep now.

Seiji could tell the wind was even stronger when they stepped back out into the hallway. The expanse of ocean and sky in the window had turned a leaden gray.

Something’s weird here.

Seeing a melancholy shadow in Shiroshi’s profile, Seiji fell into thought. Shiroshi had been exactly the same way two weeks ago when he’d gotten that envelope with the photo.

“Um, Shiroshi?”

Unable to hold it in any longer, Seiji had started to ask him about it, but just then…

“Oh, good. There you are.”

Just as they were nearing the entrance hall, they ran into Shimomura. From his expression, it seemed he’d spent quite a while searching for them.

“I’m sorry. You were away for quite some time, so I thought I’d borrow your restroom,” Shiroshi said shamelessly. The fact that he was acting completely beyond reproach made it even worse.

“I apologize. There was trouble with another guest, which delayed my call. Fukue Island just sent word that the typhoon has made the sea too rough to dispatch a boat today.”

“My, that’s discouraging.”

“It is due to my own incompetence that you’ve been stranded here. I am truly very sorry. If you’d like, I can prepare a guest room for the two of you.”

“That would be a great help. Please do.”

And so it turned out that they would be staying as guests until the storm died down. Luck was definitely on their side.

“Follow me, please.”

They set off for the annex, passing through the lone black door and crossing an arched skyway. Emerging in a carpeted second-floor corridor, they were shown to a guest room at the far end on the left.

The room was equipped with antique Italian furniture, and there were two beds against the wall opposite the windows. As expected of a former hotel, it also featured a convenient en suite bathroom.

“If there’s anything you need, you may use the intercom to summon me at any time.”

Shimomura gave a deferential bow and left the room. He really did make a phenomenal butler.

In any case, unpacking came first. Shiroshi finished quickly, but Seiji kept wandering around, charging cable in hand, looking for an outlet.

“People nowadays can’t do a thing unless their smartphones are charged, can they?”

“You’ve been borrowing mine an awful lot lately, you know.”

“…According to the weather report, the typhoon should make landfall soon. How do things look outside?” Shiroshi said.

Apparently, Seiji had hit him where it hurt.

When he followed Shiroshi over to the window, he saw they were covered on the inside by shutters.

“Huh? That’s unusual. Don’t they usually put those on the outside?”

“Yes, these are ornamental. The windows are made of thick, reinforced glass; no doubt the shutters are intended to hide it.”

So these were also just for show—empty fakes, like the books in the library.

Reaching out, Shiroshi released the latch between the two shutters, and…

“Whoa, it’s pitch black.”

Behind the shutters lay complete darkness. The blackness was impenetrable; Seiji couldn’t see a thing.

Yet he could feel the prickle of the storm on his skin, and wind howled over the water like the roar of a monster. In the depths of the darkness, an ominous presence was creeping closer.

“*Oni* devour men in the dark of night, or so they say. This really is a perfect night for it,” Shiroshi said.

His eyes seemed to see right through the darkness. Shuddering, Seiji backed up a step.

Just then, raindrops began to patter against the window.

The storm had arrived.

“…Hmm? Is that…?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Um, I mean, I might have been seeing things, but just now, outside the window—”

There was a light, Seiji was about to say, when a bright beam cut through the darkness.

It was the spotlight of a boat.

“Huh?! It can’t be! On a stormy night like this?!”

“It’s lunacy, yes, but it does seem to be true.”

Is someone making an emergency landing to wait out the storm? Seiji wondered. But almost as soon as the boat landed, it headed back out to sea. It was behaving just like the water taxi had when it brought the two of them here.

“Perhaps it’s a belated guest. Shall we go and see later on?”

However…

Before they could leave the guest room, they heard footsteps in the corridor.

There were two voices in conversation. One was probably Shimomura’s, while the other sounded as if it belonged to a man around Seiji’s age. A door opened and shut; the new guest seemed to be staying in the room right across the hall from theirs.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this…

As Seiji was puzzling over what it could be—

“Do you suppose you could go and take a look?”

“Huh? Me?”

“I’ll double your allowance for next month.”

“…Yes, sir, I’ll go at once.”

Even Seiji found himself pathetic.

Easing the door open, he stepped out into the corridor. He couldn’t hear anything now, let alone voices, so Shimomura must have returned to the main building already. That meant he’d have to rely on his eyes instead.

“Erm, sorry about this,” he apologized, his voice as soft as a mosquito’s whine, before kneeling in front of the door.

Peeping was definitely a crime, but since they were both male, Seiji didn’t feel too guilty about it. He put his eye to the keyhole, and—

Against all odds, it was Odoro Rindou.

“H-h-h-he’s in there! He’s here! *That* guy!” Seiji shrieked the second he got back. He was almost crying.

“Oh? Which guy might that be?”

“You know, that detective! Odoro Rindou! The one who got his throat gnawed by the *nue* !”

“Ah,” Shiroshi said with a nod, hitting his palm with a fist.

Odoro Rindou was an extremely sharp private detective called the “Detective Who Summons Death” by the general public. The truth, however, was that he ran a proxy service for Hell, just like Shiroshi, and was the son and heir of the other demon king, Shinno Akugorou.

In other words, they were fated rivals who’d been saddled with their fathers’ quarrel—or at least, they should have been, but…

“I see. Now that you mention it, I think I do remember someone like that.”

In that moment, Seiji felt sincerely sorry for Odoro. Who talked about their fated rival like that?

“Hmm? Come to think of it, Odoro got soaked by a downpour last time, too, didn’t he?”

“Heh-heh-heh. He may just bring rain with him wherever he goes.”

In that case, he’s got to be the most talented rain-bringer this century, Seiji grumbled to himself.

“Oh, that isn’t good.”

“Huh?”

Shiroshi had suddenly grabbed Seiji’s collar and pulled him forward.

The next moment—

Bang!

The door behind Seiji flew open with the strength of a gale-force wind.

If Shiroshi hadn’t hauled him out of the way, Seiji would probably have either ended up with a fractured skull or died on impact from having the back of his head caved in.

He’s here to kill somebody.

Sensing genuine murderous intent from the man in the doorway, Seiji swallowed hard.

“Oh, Odoro. It’s been a long time. That was quite impolite of you; you didn’t even knock.”

“My apologies. I mistook you for Peeping Toms.”

…Apparently, he’d seen right through them.

This is bad.

During the *nue* incident five months ago, Odoro had gone up against Shiroshi one-on-one and suffered an ignominious defeat, even going so far as threatening to kill him.

The situation was a powder keg, a bloodbath waiting to happen at any moment. Shivering hard, Seiji tried to slink behind Shiroshi, when…

A light knock echoed, sounding completely out of place.

“Come in.”

Kazusa, the young man who’d been arguing with Shimomura earlier, stepped into view.

“Uh, sorry. I saw the boat’s lights from the main building a minute ago, and when I came over here, I heard voices… You’re not *that* Odoro Rindou, are you?”

“In the flesh. Your request did specify tonight.”

“Well, yeah, it did. I’m just impressed you got here. I assumed you’d end up canceling or postponing.”

“I happened to have the ideal contact.”

According to Odoro, someone who’d been connected to one of his previous cases lived in Nagasaki Prefecture and owned a cruiser. After reaching the Gotou Islands by the same route as Seiji and Shiroshi, Odoro had summoned his acquaintance with a single phone call and had him ferry him out here. From the way he spoke, it sounded as if he had some dirt on the man.

Couldn’t tyranny like that be charged as a crime?

“Excuse me. This seems to be from him,” Odoro said, taking a familiar flip phone from his breast pocket. The LCD screen held an extremely simple text:

If I die, I’ll haunt you.

“Hmm. I wonder if he ran aground.”

With that casually cruel remark, Odoro nonchalantly put away his phone.

Then…

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Shiroshi Saijou. Odoro and I are members of the same profession. I hope you’ll forgive

my intrusion.”

Taking advantage of the confusion to introduce himself, Shiroshi nodded politely to Kazusa.

Shiroshi’s behavior was courteous, but he seemed an awful lot like a grade-school kid who’d been playing video games at a friend’s place and run into the master of the house.

“The same profession? Hang on, who are these two? Did you call them in to help?”

“…I really don’t know who you’re talking about,” Odoro said, gazing off in a random direction. Apparently, he was planning to ignore them.

Kazusa looked dubious, but he seemed to have picked up on Odoro’s attitude. “Well, I’ll fill you in on the details of my request. Let’s go to my room,” he said and went out into the hall.

Odoro promptly followed him. Seiji was glaring at the man’s back and willing him to go bald when Shiroshi started after the other two as if it was the natural thing to do.

“Wha—? Whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“Oh? Is something wrong?”

“Don’t give me that! He said he was going to kill you last time, remember?!”

“Ah, so that’s what this is about.” Shiroshi dropped a fist into his palm. “In that case, you needn’t worry. When our contest to send sinners to Hell began, a certain agreement was made in the presence of the Enma Ministry: Until a victor is determined, neither camp may harm the other. Even a slap will get us disqualified.”

“I see. Well, that’s a relief.”

But Seiji’s reassurance didn’t last long.

“However, that is only until our contest is settled.”

…I really don’t like the sound of that.

“After that, we’re free to do as we like. If the victor wishes to flay the loser’s camp alive or eat their livers, then that is their right. That is what Odoro was referring to.”

“Um… That won’t include me, will it?”

“Now then, shall we go? From the sound of their footsteps, I believe they’re two rooms down.”

He dodged the question!

Shiroshi left the guest room in high spirits, while Seiji followed him, close to tears.

As Shiroshi had said, Kazusa's room was two doors away from theirs. While the basic layout was the same, this room was a single with only one bed. It was rather messy, meaning that Kazusa must have been staying there for quite a while already.

The two men were seated in armchairs by the window, facing each other. Odoro had propped his walking stick against the side of his chair and crossed his legs ostentatiously, as if showing off their length.

Great. I hope he breaks them.

"…By the way," Odoro said, abruptly tapping the arm of his chair, "why must we tolerate the presence of outsiders?"

Crap, he noticed us.

Capitalizing on the fact that the other man was blatantly ignoring them, Seiji and Shiroshi had shrewdly camped out on the edge of the bed and prepared to listen in, but Odoro had collared them in under three seconds. Just as he was about to toss them out like kittens—

"Excuse me."

With an irritated grimace, Odoro took out his flip phone. He seemed to have gotten a text.

"……Huh?"

He scanned the message; then a dumbfounded look crossed his face. His eyes went to Shiroshi and Seiji. His bloodthirsty aura immediately swelled, and he *tsk*ed so loudly, it sounded like a gunshot.

Wh-what's going on?

Odoro stomped back to his chair, dropped into it heavily, and sighed. He pressed his fingers to his temples as if he were fighting a headache.

"The situation has changed. Please continue."

"…Huh? But, uh, what about those guys?"

"They aren't there."

Don't be ridiculous.

In that moment, Seiji felt his own silent retort sync up perfectly with Kazusa's. However, the other man seemed to realize it would be pointless to call Odoro out on it.

“Basically, it’s like I said in my e-mail the other day: I want you to reinvestigate Hari’s death.”

From what Kazusa said, August 19 was Riko’s birthday, as well as the day Hari had died ten years ago.

“The old man, Kenjirou, held an annual family gathering at Hotel Isola Bella around this time of year. Officially, it was to celebrate Riko’s birthday. That year, though, there was a typhoon like this one, and most of us ended up evacuating to Fukue the day before, on the eighteenth.”

The next day, during the storm, tragedy had struck.

Hari’s corpse had been discovered on the great staircase in the entrance hall. The cause of death had been shock stemming from a blow to the back of the head that had fractured her skull. The only ones on the island had been Kouji, Riko, and Keisuke Hagi—the live-in doctor who’d preceded Shimomura.

“The police said there were no signs of an intruder, and the windows and doors were all locked.”

It had happened at one in the morning.

Kouji had been in his room when he’d heard Riko scream. Running to the entry hall, he’d seen Hari’s corpse at the foot of the stairs and Riko standing there, stunned.

Had it been an accident or deliberate?

Riko was the only witness, and she retreated into silence without a word about what she’d seen.

Dr. Hagi, her attending physician, had diagnosed her with dissociative stupor, and the police investigation had proceeded with no eyewitness statements.

“They concluded that it was an accident, but I still think it was murder.”

“Oh? On what grounds?”

“Hari had begun dropping hints about a divorce. She’d said that, for the sake of her daughter, it might be better if she split with her husband and left the island.”

“Now why was that?”

“Ha! Because the guy’s a nutcase. He’d fly into these rages if Riko so much as laughed out loud, and he wouldn’t let his own kid show any emotion whatsoever. I bet he wanted a doll for a daughter, not a human.”

As Kazusa spat the words out, there was pure, unadulterated anger in his eyes. Even back then, he'd probably sided with Riko.

"She may be like that now, but Riko used to be stubborn enough for two, and especially back then, she was constantly clashing with her dad. It would've been enough of a reason to leave him."

"So what you're saying is that you believe Kouji grew enraged and pushed Hari down the stairs when she brought up the divorce?"

Kazusa nodded adamantly. "I think Riko lost her mind after she witnessed the murder. Also, I think it might be their fault she's the way she is now."

"What do you mean?"

"The storm kept the police from getting here until the day after the accident. That means there was time to shut her up. That bastard Hagi, the live-in doctor, might have given Riko some sort of drug to make sure she couldn't tell them anything."

Dr. Hagi had apparently been a devotee of Kouji's, and an avid doll collector. He wouldn't have hesitated to commit a crime in order to cover up Kouji's sins—or that was Kazusa's theory. Seiji thought it sounded a little too melodramatic.

Kazusa seemed to be aware of this, because he awkwardly cleared his throat with a cough.

"I got this through an acquaintance who's a crime reporter. If you're as good a detective as the rumors say, it should be enough."

He tossed a thick manila envelope onto the table. Odoro didn't even move; he just gave it a disinterested glance. "Yes, it's enough. In fact, I don't even need that envelope."

"What?"

"I, too, have law enforcement connections," he said, rather snobbishly.

Shiroshi reached in from the side. "In that case, it would be a shame to waste this. Let's have a look at it, shall we?" He cheerfully began to pull the documents toward him, but—

Odoro's walking stick came down on the envelope with a sharp *thwap*, stopping it. Their silent tug-of-war went on for a little while and looked just like a comedy skit from the outside.

Then…

“Oh, Odoro, you have another text.”

An almost accusatory electronic noise sounded from Odoro’s pocket.

Glaring at Shiroshi with loathing, Odoro gave a massive *tsk* and lifted his walking stick. Shiroshi promptly snatched up the envelope, brushed the dirt off it, and smiled.

I don’t really get it, but it looks like he won.

“I see. Materials from the police investigation, hmm?”

Every document in the envelope was related to Hari’s case.

Everything was recorded in fine detail, from the state of the scene of the accident to observations regarding the corpse. The fact that Kazusa had gone out of his way to acquire something like this spoke volumes about his tenacity.

Then there was a light knock at the door.

“Excuse me,” came a voice. Without waiting for a response, a man entered. “Shimomura told me you’d called in a suspicious detective. What do you think you’re doing, Kazusa?”

The newcomer seemed to be in his late twenties. He had monolid eyes that tilted up rather aggressively at the outer corners, and his half-frame glasses made him look intellectual. He was dressed stylishly in a suit from a famous, high-end brand; he looked like a sharp young entrepreneur.

However, there was a sharp edge of irascibility in his cold voice. He didn’t seem like the type who had many friends.

“That is Shirou Ayatsuji. He’s Kazusa’s elder half brother, Riko’s cousin, and is widely considered to be the next head of the Ayatsuji family,” Shiroshi promptly explained.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what he looks like.” Seiji gave a weary sigh. First an artist, then a designer, and now this guy… Was this island a den of successful, talented men or something?

“Huh? If they’re half brothers, then…”

“Shirou’s mother was Kenjirou’s legal wife; Kazusa is the child of his mistress.”

Ah. That was pretty simple.

“Apparently, Kenjirou disowned Kazusa because he went into fashion design. Shirou, on the other hand, graduated from the Faculty of Economics at the University of Tokyo, and has since occupied an executive post at one of the family’s subsidiary companies.”

It sounded like the brothers were polar opposites.

“Dammit. That bastard snitched on me,” Kazusa growled. He fixed Shirou with a steady glare. “I don’t have to tell you a thing. Get out.”

But then…

“Wait a second. It can’t be… Are you Odoro Rindou?” The color drained from Shirou’s face as he looked at the detective his brother had summoned.

“Have we met?”

“No, we don’t know each other. It’s just, I once attended a party held by the prefectural governor where someone was suddenly taken ill, and you—”

His voice trembled. He was frightened.

In political circles, the Detective Who Summons Death seemed to be considered so ominous, it was enough to give people trauma.

“You’ve got to be kidding! Would you think a little for once?! Calling in these dubious characters—! Do you want someone else to die on this island?!”

“That doesn’t matter to me. Not if I can turn a murderer who’s walking free over to the cops!”

“…Who are you talking about?”

“Huh? That insane crow bastard, obviously.”

“Kouji?! Don’t tell me you’re trying to rake up Hari’s incident after all this—!”

But Shirou was cut off by two brief *thunks*. It sounded like the rap of a judge’s gavel calling for silence.

Startled, the pair shut up, and their eyes turned to Odoro. He’d thumped the floor by his feet with his cane.

“About that,” the detective began impassively, clasping his hands on his knees, fingers laced together. “Unfortunately, the answer won’t be the one you’re hoping for.”

“…What do you mean?”

“I mean that Hari wasn’t murdered.”

The air seemed to freeze.

Odoro had gotten straight to the point, and he directed a chilly glance at the stunned group.

“No traces of a struggle were found on Hari’s corpse, and her clothing wasn’t disheveled. She was wearing her nightgown to go

to bed, and alcohol was detected in her system. The circumstantial evidence all points to an accident caused by intoxication." He spoke smoothly and articulately, with the eloquence of an actor on the stage. "Also, there were contusions on her corpse. Not only were they found all over her body, but every one of them resulted in subcutaneous bleeding—a sign that they were most likely inflicted while she was alive."

"…So?"

"When a person is pushed down a set of stairs with the intent to kill them, they're ordinarily pushed in the upper body, regardless of which way they're facing—meaning they fall headfirst. Since the victim falls forward, they do so for quite some distance, so in many cases, it's the damage to their head or neck when they land that proves fatal."

Seiji could visualize that.

That was because, when he was in grade school, he'd swiped some food that had been left as an offering to a *Jizo* statue to snack on, and his furious great-grandmother had pushed him down the shrine's stone steps.

"In contrast to this, accidental falls begin with a misstep, and the victim tumbles a long distance down the stairs, striking many points all over their body. This leaves bruising like the sort observed on Hari's corpse. The abrasion on her palm also suggests that she attempted to grab the railing when her foot slipped."

True.

According to the investigation materials, blood had been found at two points on the great staircase. One was on the railing, near the top of the stairs, while the other was on the edge of the second step from the bottom.

Putting all of that together…

"An inebriated Hari was attempting to descend the stairs when her foot slipped. Although she grabbed the railing, she was unable to catch herself and tumbled down the steps, resulting in many contusions. Once she reached the bottom, she was unfortunate enough to strike her head on the corner of a step, and the damage was fatal." Odoro had gone through his hypothesis without so much as a pause. "Taking all of the above into consideration, we may conclude that this was an accident.

That said, there is still ample reason to investigate what precipitated this accident."

Silence descended around them.

"That's ridiculous," Kazusa murmured, stunned. His face had gone so pale that he looked like an entirely different person.

Shirou let out a brief, dry laugh. "What a farce. You expose your relatives' disgraces right and left, and this is what it gets you? Hilarious."

There was clear sarcasm and contempt in his tone, but there was definite relief beneath it.

A dangerous light flared in Kazusa's eyes, and he impulsively hauled Shirou up by the shirtfront.

"Oh yeah? If you're just going to snort at everything and say, 'I told you so,' then what the hell did you come to the island for?! And on Riko's twentieth birthday, no less!"

"I—," Shirou started to say, then shook his head wordlessly.

"Ha! That's what I figured. I bet they sent you to chaperone your screwup of a little brother. Just you try getting in my way over Riko, though. I'll kill you, no matter what it takes."

Kazusa's voice held anger, hostility—and genuine murderous intent. Even before this incident, there must have been quite a lot of deep-rooted enmity between the two of them.

That aside…

"Um, Shiroshi? Are you sure we shouldn't say something?"

"Hmm? Why should we?"

"Kouji looked like a yokai earlier, which means…"

Kouji was a sinner who had committed some sort of crime. Could Odoro's interpretation be wrong? Had Hari's death really been murder, and had Kouji been her killer?

Shiroshi folded his arms, thinking hard. He didn't look convinced.

"I'm not sure. If Kouji's sin was murdering his wife, as Kazusa claims, then Kaji-ga-baba doesn't quite fit the situation."

"What do you mean?"

"The sin you saw may be unrelated to what happened with Hari—something that hasn't yet come to light. Like a corpse hidden beneath the floorboards that no one has noticed, perhaps."

A chill ran through Seiji, and he shuddered.

“Don’t tell me… Are you saying somebody else is dead here?”

But just then—

“Excuse the interruption,” said an inappropriately cheerful voice as someone opened the door without knocking.

It was Aka.

“Huh? Aren’t you the part-timer?”

“Yes, my name’s Aka. I’m just working here over summer vacation. It’s a pleasure to serve you!”

Having shamelessly introduced himself, Aka doffed his cap, held it to his chest, and bowed.

“First, I have a message from Mr. Shimomura: ‘Dinner preparations are complete, so please change into formal attire and come to the dining room.’ ”

Then he turned to Kazusa with a smile.

“Also, I recorded what you just said on my phone. Mr. Shimomura told me you’d been threatening him and Shirou, and that he’d be speaking with the police about it soon. ‘No matter what it takes, I’ll kill you.’ That was perfect!”

“Hey, kid. What’re you—?”

“Okay, I’m off! Kazusa, if I were you, I’d leave the island as soon as I could. Tomorrow, even! The rest of you, have a good evening!”

And then Aka was gone before anyone could stop him.

For a little while, silence fell.

Finally, Kazusa cursed. “Dammit. Go to Hell, every last one of you.”

*

In any case, it was time for dinner.

“He said ‘formal attire,’ but we can just go like this, can’t we?” asked Seiji.

“As they say, ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do,’ so I think we should do as he requested.”

“Huh? But I don’t have any clothes like that…”

“Heh-heh-heh. Actually, I thought something like this might come up,” Shiroshi said rather proudly, taking a folded garment bag out of his luggage.

Its contents turned out to be a three-piece suit, complete with jacket and vest. Seiji had thought their suitcases seemed weirdly bulky, but he'd had no idea that was in there.

"What about the size? Will it fit?"

"Well, Beniko *did* tailor it herself…"

That remark jogged Seiji's memory.

Once, when he'd been in the changing room after taking a bath, Beniko had attacked him and measured him exhaustively from head to toe as he stood there in his underwear. The sudden shock had left Seiji almost in tears, but apparently, she'd been getting measurements for this suit.

There really seemed to be no limit to what Beniko was capable of. In her next life, she'd probably be reborn in the twenty-second century as Dorami-chan from *Doraemon*… Or maybe as the Terminator.

"Heh-heh. As one would imagine, you really do give a different impression when dressed properly."

"Huh. I do?"

"It appears that with the right clothes, anyone can look good."

That hadn't felt like a compliment, but was that just his paranoia talking?

"The bed head… Well, it should be fine as is. You wouldn't be you without it, after all. We'll work on correcting that slump of yours gradually," Shiroshi said, brushing some dust from Seiji's shoulders, then patting him on the back.

Ah. So all the back-patting lately must have been to try to get him to stand up straighter.

"All right, now it's my turn," Shiroshi declared, and he began to change clothes. Shiroshi was beautiful, but that still didn't mean Seiji was interested in seeing another guy in his underwear, so he hastily focused on fiddling around on his phone instead.

Shiroshi could pull off even a bargain-bin outfit with ease, so Seiji wasn't exactly waiting in suspense. There was no way a custom-made suit wouldn't look amazing on him—or so he'd thought.

"…Huh?"

When he turned around and saw Shiroshi, Seiji blinked.

"What's the matter?"

“Uh, it’s just, it doesn’t suit you as well as I thought it would. It’s not that it doesn’t look good on you, but it’s… Hmm… Oh, I know. It’s your height!”

Since Shiroshi was short, he looked a bit like a kid dressed up for his *Shichi-Go-San* celebration.

They’d never intentionally stood side by side, but now that he was looking at Shiroshi, the height difference between them was surprisingly large. In fact…

“You look like you’re about high school age, but even then, you’re on the short side, aren’t you?”

“…Well, I’m not certain of that.”

“I think you might even be a little shorter than Beniko.”

“No, Beniko’s shoes have high heels, so she just seems taller. When she takes them off, we’re the same height.” Shiroshi’s tone was calm, but unusually, Seiji got the feeling he was irritated. It amused him a little bit, and a teasing sort of grin rose to his lips, when—

“All right, I trust you won’t mind giving up smoking starting tomorrow, Seiji.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” he shrieked, not meaning to.

If Seiji *was* an actual pet, treating him like that would have violated animal welfare laws.

“You can be weirdly childish sometimes,” he said resentfully.

“Well, I am still very much a child,” Shiroshi responded coolly.

Seiji was about to tell him to quit acting like a kid whenever it was convenient, when he blinked in surprise, struck by a sudden thought.

“Actually, about how old are you?”

“It seems very late to be asking that.”

It really did.

“Uh, well, I just had the feeling you’ve been around since the Heian period…”

“Heh-heh-heh. That would make me as old as Takamura. No, I was born after the war, around the time when black markets went up on top of the ruins. In human terms, I believe I’d be about fifteen.”

“Huh?! Wait, so you really *are* a kid?!”

Who’d have thought he was actually a teenager?

…It really did seem ridiculously late to be learning any of this.

“Come to think of it, I don’t know anything about you, do I?”

“Well, I don’t know very much about you, either, Seiji.”

…What?

Now that he thought about it, he’d been living with Shiroshi for what was easily seven and a half months. “Seven months already,” or “only seven months”… Which was the right way to think about it?

One way or another, I feel like I do know.

But maybe he’d just been assuming.

And then…

“Yet strangely enough, I don’t think there’s a problem like this. If there’s something I don’t know, I can simply ask as needed. After all, I’m confident you’ll tell me,” Shiroshi said with a gentle smile.

At the sight of that smile, something occurred to Seiji: Maybe they hadn’t known much about each other earlier simply because they hadn’t needed to.

“…You think?”

“I do.” Shiroshi gave a joking nod, then chuckled.

It was contagious, and when Seiji smiled back, he felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Actually, I think so, too.”

Just then, the intercom buzzed, as if to hurry them along. Apparently, they’d been taking too long to change.

“My, we’re very late. I’m going to change into something else. Wait for me, if you would.”

You could just wear the Shichi-Go-San suit, Seiji thought—but he got the feeling he’d be ordered to quit smoking immediately if he was careless enough to say it, so he kept his mouth shut.

Still, it seemed like it had shown on his face.

“Let’s start by limiting you to one cigarette a day.”

“…Please, spare me.”

*

They followed the directions from the intercom to the main building and found the dining room behind the great staircase.

A glittering Venetian glass chandelier hung from the arched ceiling, and silver cutlery was laid out neatly on a long table

covered with a pure white cloth. Frankly, if Shimomura hadn't been serving, it would have been easy to mistake the room for a movie set.

Then suddenly…

"What's this? I heard we were to dress in formalwear, but you haven't changed since lunch."

When they turned around, they saw Odoro in a swallowtail coat. He'd arrived even later than Seiji and Shiroshi, so he seemed to be habitually tardy. Somehow, the coat looked even better than perfect on him. Since Odoro basically cosplayed in Western clothes all the time, though, the only strong emotion it provoked in Seiji was a desire to see the man go bald.

"No, it's not something I'm accustomed to wearing. I thought this outfit wouldn't be impolite so long as I wore a haori coat."

"…Oh, I see. You weren't tall enough, hmm?"

Instantly, Shiroshi's smile froze. *Uh-oh. Not good…*

"And you, Odoro. I'm glad to see you were able to make do with what you had. I feared you might have shrunk a bit from being chewed on by that *nue*."

"Shiroshi, Shiroshi, Shiroshi, don't—"

"…Oh-ho. I'll accept any fight you pick with me, no questions asked."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! He's in a really bad mood right now!"

Bowing to Odoro with the speed of a professional bootlicker, Seiji grabbed the back of Shiroshi's collar and ran to the table.

That was seriously immature of him!

It was just one thing after the other…

"Now then, dinner is served."

With Shimomura's words as the signal, white napkins were unfolded on laps, and wine was poured for each of them from a crystal decanter.

The Ayatsuji brothers, seated across from each other, were also dressed formally.

What surprised Seiji was the fact that Kazusa, who seemed like he'd loathe formalities more than anyone else there, was wearing his tuxedo quite well. It was like getting a glimpse of his pedigree or his good upbringing.

Their expressions don't match the occasion at all, though.

Both men were wearing sullen frowns.

Frankly, the sight seemed likely to make any dish taste bad. Granted, the idea of this group of people engaging in lively, pleasant conversation seemed like a scene straight out of a horror movie anyway.

The biggest problem is…

Shiroshi and Odoro.

The seating placement had put them directly across from each other, creating a situation that could only be described as "Hell on earth." It was like watching a lit fuse get shorter by the second, and Seiji felt half dead with nerves.

"Heh-heh-heh. Even now, you being you, you cleaned your plate, Seiji."

"…That definitely wasn't a compliment, was it?"

"Why don't the two of us chat, at least? It may serve as some diversion."

"Well, yeah, that's true."

That said, Seiji couldn't think of any topic of conversation suitable for this type of situation.

"Um, a lot of supernaturals have odd names, don't they? Like 'Odoro' and 'Shiroshi.' "

He'd said it on impulse, but he realized almost immediately that he'd completely blown his choice of subject. Seiji turned pale, and Shiroshi burst out laughing, his shoulders shaking.

"No, no. I don't think you're in any position to talk, Seiji."

"Huh? Really?" That was surprising; he'd thought his name was ordinary in the extreme. "My face was blue-black when I was born because the umbilical cord had gotten wrapped around my neck, so they named me 'Seiji,' using the characters for 'blue child.' "

"…Huh?" Unexpectedly, it was Odoro who'd reacted. He gave Seiji a look that said, plain as day, *What on earth are you talking about?*

"Are you saying it's got nothing to do with Seiji Togo?" Odoro asked.

"Huh? Who's that?"

"A renowned artist of the Showa era who painted pictures of beautiful women. I'm impressed you actually managed to thrive like this," answered Shiroshi. He really did sound deeply moved.

Actually, Seiji's parents had told him something similar: "We didn't think you'd grow up." Those words had always weighed on his mind, but Seiji thought he might not like the answer he got if he asked about it, so he hadn't. As long as you didn't open it, even Pandora's box was just interior decor.

"What about your name, Odoro?" Shiroshi asked, completely ignoring the mood as usual.

Yikes, he's going to lose it, Seiji thought, but apparently the exchange a minute ago had taken the edge off Odoro's belligerence.

"…It's nothing unique. My name and my twin's form a set." He seemed to regret the words as soon as he said them, because he gave a sharp *tsk*. If his parents had been with him, they would definitely have lectured him on his manners.

But a set with his brother's name? What did that mean?

"I see: '*keikyoku*.' 'Briars and thorns.' " Shiroshi gave a satisfied nod, having reached the answer early as usual.

What…? Seiji wondered, and Shiroshi used his finger to trace the characters on the tablecloth for him. *Ah, so that's what he meant.*

"Those are fine names. Particularly your deceased elder brother's—"

But Shiroshi's casual remark was interrupted by a *thud* that made the very air vibrate.

There was a dessert knife sticking out of the table where Odoro had just stabbed it.

"Hey, what's going on over there?"

Kazusa and Shirou looked stunned. In sharp contrast, Odoro's face was as expressionless as a Noh mask. He rose from his chair with a clatter.

"I will not permit anyone to speak of my brother in my presence, not now, not ever."

His voice was a little too cool for the emotion in it to be called "murderous hostility."

Then all that remained was the knife that had barbarically sprouted from the table.

"Shall we tattle on him to Shimomura? If he's required to pay for damages, it won't be less than seven figures."

“…You really are a genius at giving people a hard time, you know that?”

“Still, if he killed his twin himself, it’s no wonder he’s like that.”

Oh? Seiji blinked in surprise. As usual, there was something like pity in Shiroshi’s voice.

However…

“That said, sympathy and empathy may be nothing more than arrogance.”

For some reason, it sounded like he was mocking himself as well.

*

Dinner ended without further incident, and they retired to their room.

According to Shimomura, wine and light refreshments had been set out for everyone in the parlor. Service just didn’t get better than this.

It’s not as if we can drink the night away, though.

The letter that had started this whole thing had predicted that, *On the nineteenth of August, a dismemberment will occur*, so there was a good chance something would happen tonight.

So far, however, each mystery had only given rise to more mysteries. Who had actually sent that letter? What sin was Kaji-ga-baba revealing? Shiroshi might have had a theory, but so far, he was keeping it to himself.

“…Hmm?”

Hearing the faint sound of someone sleeping, Seiji scanned the room.

Huh? That’s unusual.

Shiroshi was sitting in one of the chairs by the window, his eyes closed. His book had fallen to the carpet, meaning he must have nodded off while reading.

Is he just tired from the trip? Or…no, maybe not.

Looking closer, Seiji saw faint dark circles under Shiroshi’s eyes, and his face also seemed a little paler than normal. He might not have been sleeping properly for a while.

Oh, I get it. It’s because of Aka.

While Shiroshi was generally calm, he'd seemed preoccupied recently. Granted, Seiji still hadn't managed to get him to talk about it…

With a crackle like a jumping spark, a memory flared in his mind.

"Hey there. Been a while, huh, Seiji."

It was a memory of the time Inokoshi, a childhood friend of his who'd grown up around the same area, had abruptly turned up at Seiji's apartment wearing a haggard smile. He'd ruined his health, lost his job, was drowning in debt from gambling, and had been planning to kill himself without telling Seiji about any of it.

There was a degree of magnitude separating them, but Seiji got the feeling that Shiroshi's face looked similar. It was as if he were brooding about something.

In retrospect…

"I was thinking we could go on one last good bender."

That invitation of Inokoshi's had been studded with hints.

Maybe the reason he'd visited Seiji's apartment at the very end hadn't been to say good-bye, but because he'd hoped Seiji would pick up on his distress and stop him.

That he'd prevent his suicide.

But what had Seiji said instead?

"Listen, could you maybe loan me a little of that?"

That was probably why Inokoshi had shoved all of his loans, all of his misfortune, onto Seiji by making him his guarantor.

If I'd said something else to him that night…

There was no way to fix any of it now.

I wish I was someone else.

He knew full well that thinking like that wouldn't help anything. After all, even if he became a better person, Seiji would still be Seiji.

Even so, he thought it:

If I wasn't me, would Inokoshi still be alive?

Ultimately, it's too late to change anything, he mumbled to himself in his head.

Seiji got up and retrieved the book from the floor, set it on the side table, then dug a light summer blanket out of their luggage and draped it over Shiroshi.

Sleep well, he told him silently. Seiji unplugged the charger from his phone, lay down on his stomach on one of the beds, and opened a search engine.

…I mean, there's no way Shiroshi actually needs my help.

Still, he was sick of having situations deteriorate until they were past saving, while he just stood there helplessly.

"Hmm, Kaji-ga-baba… Yikes, that's pretty scary."

Seiji tried looking it up on his phone, but he didn't get the sort of results he was hoping for. He'd thought he might be able to find a clue about the incident that would take a little of the pressure off Shiroshi, but…

"Hmm?"

A thought suddenly flashed through his mind.

Come to think of it, Beniko doesn't have a smartphone, either, does she?

She almost never used computers as well, making her investigation methods entirely analog. Beniko would find the locations of people related to a case and go door-to-door interviewing them or use her industry connections to uncover the information she was after. She worked so hard, it would put any detective drama to shame.

But…

Is it possible she hasn't tried checking online?

Hotel Isola Bella had once been enormously popular with a certain subculture. Wasn't it possible that some of its members had recently decided to post their treasured finds on the internet? If that spirit photograph happened to be one of those things—

"I guess I'll give it a shot."

Seiji kept surfing the net for three solid hours, plugging his phone in again somewhere in the middle. Understandably, he'd begun to get drowsy and was rubbing his bleary eyes, when…

"Hmm? …Whoa!"

It was an anonymous forum dedicated to the occult.

The sepia-toned image looked like a scan of a two-page spread from an old magazine. The headline, typeset in a creepy font, read *Bizarre Scoop! The Mystery of the Mirror That Foretells Death! The Rumored Spirit Photo Revealed?!* The whole thing felt extremely retro.

But that meant…

“I found it!”

Seiji instinctively pumped his fist in the air, but a second later —

“Huh?”

With no warning, his browser shut down.

Seiji hastily tried to launch it again, but the connection must have been unstable, because the web browser wouldn’t open. It looked like he was still able to send and receive texts, but browsing wasn’t going to happen. Had the typhoon knocked out power to the base station?

“O-of all times…”

Seiji’s shoulders slumped, but just then—

“Ah, you seem to be in the middle of something.”

“…What?”

Seiji looked behind him and saw a hazy will-o’-the-wisp practically floating in his face.

“Bwaaah!”

“I’m terribly sorry. I didn’t mean to startle—”

“No way, that was completely on purpose!”

If Seiji had been a grade-school kid, he would have tagged him with the nickname “Golgo” for sneaking up on him like that.

Needless to say, it was Takamura Ono.

He’d been dressed in traditional Heian-era clothes when last they’d met, but this time, rather incredibly, he’d appeared in a double-breasted trench coat. The coat fell to his ankles, but he walked with the assurance of someone who was used to these things. Between that and his height—which was easily over 180 centimeters—he had the dignity of a top model.

Handsome, brilliant, skilled in both war and academics— In Takamura, the Heian period had produced a perfect superhuman. Now, more than a thousand years after his death, he was apparently still hard at work at a government office in the Enma Ministry, as Third Officer of the Underworld.

He’d managed to work two jobs when he was alive—one at the imperial court during the day, and the other in the Enma Ministry by night—making him a dyed-in-the-wool corporate wage slave.

“Huh? Takamura, if you’re here, is this going to be another detective contest with Odoro?”

“Yes. I will be serving as the referee.”

It had begun long ago, in the Edo period.

The *Ino Mononoke Roku*, written by Ino Budayu, is a supernatural tale said to be a true story. It features the names of two great yokai: Demon King Sanmoto Gorouzaemon and Evil God Shinno Akugorou.

At the time, the two had been engaged in a cutthroat trial of strength, with the title of “demon king” as the prize. Their contest had ended in a draw, however, and it had fallen to the next generation to settle the matter.

In other words, to Sanmoto Gorouzaemon’s son, Shiroshi, and Shinno Akugorou’s son, Odoro.

This proxy service for Hell had begun on the suggestion of the Enma Ministry, which was officiating the contest. The rules were simple: The first one to expose the crimes of a hundred sinners and send them to Hell would be declared king of the demon realm. Essentially, it was a detective battle of wits.

…Although, Shiroshi was a little too easygoing, meaning he was sailing smoothly toward defeat.

Speaking of which…

“My, my, Takamura. It’s been a long time.”

Shiroshi stretched like a cat who’d just woken up and eagerly rose from his chair.

“I’m very sorry to have disturbed your slumber.”

“Don’t be; I did think you’d come. It was you who sent those texts to Odoro earlier, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, two of them.”

“Huh?!” exclaimed Seiji. “You mean the ones that came in when he was about to kick us out?”

In short…

Information served as the foundation of their deductions, so in an attempt to ensure fairness, Takamura had sent Odoro a message “requesting” he let Shiroshi listen in on his conversation with his client.

…Is the Enma Ministry basically like the backstage staff of a quiz program?

“Actually, Master Shiroshi, I would like to request your cooperation as well.”

“Oh? How do you mean?”

“Half a month prior, a letter was sent to you from Hotel Isola Bella. If possible, I would like you to share the information it held with Master Odoro as well.”

“Yes, by all means. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you.”

Takamura respectfully accepted the envelope; then, incredibly, he began taking photos of it with a smartphone. Seiji had just assumed he’d physically give Odoro the letter, but it seemed like he was planning to send the photos as a message attachment.

From the way he typed his message using a series of ultra-quick flicking motions, Takamura apparently knew what he was doing.

“Now then, as I’m sure you are aware, the official contest will begin at midnight. Please wait in your room until then.”

“Heh-heh. The old standard, yes.”

The rules were the same as last time.

Essentially, victory would go to the swift; whoever was the first to expose all the sins and hand down judgment would win.

“Even if you are Great King Enma’s agent, it must be tiring having to travel around all the time.”

“As they say, ‘The life of a government official is an unenviable one.’ Unfortunately, we’re shorthanded everywhere at the moment.”

“Why don’t I send you a mid-year gift? Is there anything in particular you’d like?”

“…Huh? They can ship those to Hell?” Seiji wondered aloud.

As they chatted idly, it began to feel as if they were kicking back on a veranda somewhere, munching on rice crackers. It really wasn’t possible for this group to maintain a sense of tension in the first place.

However…

“So, um, what exactly should we do next?” asked Seiji.

“Well, let’s see. If I had to say, perhaps wait right here?”

What?

“But the letter predicted a dismemberment… Shouldn’t I keep watch, at least?”

“That’s a good point. However, we don’t yet know who is going to dismember whom.”

“Oh.”

Shiroshi was right: The victim could be one of the guests, Kazusa or Shirou, or even Kouji or Shimomura.

“Of course, you’re a possibility as well, Seiji.”

“Eep!”

“Heh-heh. Now then, why don’t we play cards to pass the time? Would you care to join us, Takamura?”

And before long, they had a game of cards underway.

They tried poker first, but Seiji couldn’t seem to remember the rules, so they switched to old maid. Seiji had assumed that Shiroshi would win by a mile as usual, but surprisingly, Takamura proved to be the dark horse.

“No one’s harder to read than you, Takamura,” Shiroshi said. It could have been a compliment or sour grapes.

“Oh, no, I don’t think it’s that impressive,” Takamura responded with a shy, self-conscious smile. Whether it was natural or intentional, one thing was for sure: He was magnanimous.

“Now then, Seiji, as a penalty for coming in last, why don’t you go to the main building and bring us back some drinks? They were in the parlor, if I recall.”

I don’t wanna.

But he had a feeling that if he said that, he really would be ordered to quit smoking this time.

“…Okay. I’ll be back.”

As soon as he stepped out into the hall, Seiji could hear the wind moaning like a howling, raging beast.

“Yikes, it’s so dark!”

Lights designed to look like gas lamps shone all down the corridor. Since this was a former hotel, though, the hallway was wide enough for several people to easily pass one another, so it was still rather gloomy.

The heavy, moist air seemed to cling to him like damp clothes.

Seiji felt as if the night had stroked him down the back of his neck, and all his hair stood on end. The first step he took might be his last; the darkness would swallow him, and he’d never come back.

Come on, that’s ridiculous.

He tried to laugh it off, but his cheeks had gone stiff, and it didn’t come out right. Under the circumstances, his best move

was to quickly get this errand over and done with, so he walked along, focusing on the path ahead—

And got completely lost.

"Um, I was pretty sure it was right after we turned at the entrance hall…"

That was weird; he couldn't find the parlor. What's more, he'd been drawn to the light and turned a corner, meaning now he didn't even know where he was.

Seiji stopped for a moment, inhaled, and called out into the darkness.

"Hello? Is anybody there?"

The only response was the howl of the rain and wind.

However…

Huh?

He thought he'd heard a faint noise. Over on the side of the hallway? No—on the other side of the door.

Is someone in there?

Seiji crept over to the door closest to him and strained his ears, trying to hear what was happening on the other side.

If it was Shimomura, he was home free; he could just have the other man show him the way to the parlor. If it was anybody else, though… "Awkward" wouldn't even begin to cover it.

"Um, excuse me," Seiji called quietly, turning the doorknob. He pulled the door open, peeking through the widening crack.

"Huh?"

The room was deserted—or rather, it was pitch black, so he couldn't really tell. It didn't feel as if anyone else was in there, though.

Was I hearing things?

Some light would have been nice, but Seiji didn't know where the switch was. When he held up the light on his phone instead, rows of familiar book spines stood out against the dark.

This was the library.

"Huh? But I can't have…"

Had he taken a wrong turn back at the entrance hall? Seiji's shoulders slumped, and he cursed his own inattention.

On the face of the grandfather clock, the minute and hour hands were just about to overlap at XII.

It was almost midnight.

…Wait. What's that?

He'd caught a whiff of an unpleasant odor.

It was as if he'd licked a rusty spoon. No, it was more metallic than that. More raw.

Blood?

A terrible fear swept over Seiji, and goose bumps broke out on his upper arms. He took an involuntary step backward and suddenly felt a lukewarm breeze on his back.

"Huh?"

He turned around and saw the mirror.

It was the so-called Mirror That Foretold Death, and its frame held a reflected image of the room: Ceiling-high bookshelves and the grandfather clock. And—

"Ah, agh!"

The moment Seiji's eyes found it, he froze.

It was a headless corpse.

It lay at the foot of the grandfather clock, dark blood staining the carpet. The upper body gleamed wetly with gore, and even though it had no head, the corpse was easily over a hundred and eighty centimeters long. It had on a jet-black robe, like the one Death wore.

It's Kouji.

Seiji's throat let out a whistling noise.

He realized he'd screamed, and a moment later, Seiji was scrambling out of the room.

Oh, shit! I should've at least shone my light on the corpse and made sure before I—

But it wasn't as if he had the courage to turn back now. As Seiji ran for dear life, the grandfather clock began chiming behind him, as if it were chasing him. He skidded on the floor of the entrance hall, stumbled and banged his knee on the stairs, and fled into the skyway to the annex—and the whole time, the clock rang out.

One, two… Six, seven… Ten, eleven.

Twelve.

Midnight.

As the last chime died away, Seiji flung open the door to his room and screamed at the pair sitting by the window. "A-a dead body! It had no head! Kouji!"

And…

Takamura rose from his chair, as if that had been some sort of signal. In his usual habit, he bowed respectfully without so much as a sound.

“I shall take my leave, then. I pray for your good fortune in battle.”

Then the man simply vanished, like smoke rising into the sky. It always looked like a magic trick when he left.

“Um, in, in the l-libra—”

“First, calm down, please. You look as if you found a dismembered corpse.”

“Yeah, *that*!”

Seiji was panting for breath, and his knees were quaking. He desperately tried to quiet his pounding heart and swallowed down bitter stomach acid, then told Shiroshi what he’d just seen.

“My, my.” It was the exact reaction Seiji had expected, and Shiroshi briskly got up from his chair. “Let’s visit the library first, shall we? Seeing as there’s been no commotion so far, I would imagine no one else has discovered the corpse yet.”

They grabbed the room’s flashlight just in case, then stepped out into the corridor.

Just then…

“Hmm?”

Under the violent sound of the rain, Seiji thought he’d heard a rumble of thunder. *No way*, Seiji thought, and he glanced out the window just in time to see a dim white light race through the darkness.

Lightning.

“Heh-heh-heh. Now it really is like a horror movie.”

“Um…don’t tell me you’re actually a closet horror fan.”

While they were talking, they reached the first floor of the main building, and the library. Seiji flinched away from the door, filled with trepidation, but when Shiroshi finally persuaded him to pull it open…

“Huh?”

He froze, stunned. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing—because there was nothing *to* see.

No headless corpse in a jet-black robe. No dark bloodstain on the carpet. None of the things that should have been in the room

were there.

“Huh? Wh-what…?”

“Hmm. The impressions in the carpet from the weight of the bookshelves are still there. From the fading, it seems unlikely that any of the furnishings have been moved, or that it was switched for another identical carpet.”

In other words—there had never been a corpse here.

“B-but… No…” A wave of dizziness swept over Seiji, and he staggered.

“It would have been possible to make a doll look like a corpse. However, if there was a bloodstain on the carpet…” Shiroshi put a hand to his chin, thinking.

At that point, a thought occurred to Seiji.

“Could it be because my left eye got hurt?”

Two weeks ago, Serina had slashed his eye with a carving knife. Fortunately, it hadn’t affected his sight, and the scar was nearly gone. Seiji had just assumed it had healed up and everything was back to normal, but…

If the Mirror of Illumination’s power was acting up or something…

Could he have been hallucinating?

“…I see.” After hearing Seiji’s explanation, Shiroshi nodded, then folded his arms and thought. “Do you mean to say the power of the Mirror of Illumination may be running wild? It isn’t entirely implausible, but…”

“That, or maybe I was so scared, I saw something else and mistook it for a corpse.”

“ ‘Doubts beget doubts,’ as they say. Still, you doubt yourself first and foremost, don’t you, Seiji?” Shiroshi actually sounded impressed.

Just then, they heard the door open.

“What are you two doing here?”

It was Shimomura. From the flashlight he was holding, he seemed to be on patrol.

“We’d intended to get something to drink, but we lost our way. You’re still working, Shimomura?”

“Yes, because—” The man hesitated, and there was a momentary silence. “You haven’t seen Master Kouji, have you?”

Seiji’s heart thudded in his chest.

He almost blurted out, “I saw him,” but Shiroshi checked him with a look.

Kouji’s headless corpse was right there a minute ago.

He really wanted to say something, but the corpse had disappeared.

“Has something happened to him?” asked Shiroshi.

“No, not that I’m aware of. It’s just that he doesn’t seem to be in his room. He’s almost always there at this hour.”

Shimomura hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary inside Kouji’s room, so he’d been patrolling the building, making sure the doors and windows were properly locked as he went.

Don’t tell me…

Seiji’s heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

Had Kouji vanished because he’d been in here, a headless corpse, and the killer had moved his body elsewhere?

“I can’t imagine he’s gone outside in this weather. Shall we help you look?” volunteered Shiroshi.

“No. That’s a very kind offer, though,” Shimomura said with a shake of his head.

Just then, the world outside the window flashed bright white.

More lightning.

A moment later, there was a roar as if the sky was caving in, and all the lights went out.

They’d lost power.

“My, my, the lights in the garden have gone out as well. It’s taken out the whole system.”

“Yes, this happens every year. Power should be restored in a few hours.”

“The mansion is a former hotel, right? Doesn’t it have a generator?”

“There’s a boiler room in the basement…but I’m told there was a fatal accident there once, and it’s been closed off ever since.”

“I see. We’ll just have to be patient and wait, then.” Shiroshi turned on his flashlight with a *click*. “If the power’s gone out, there’s even more reason to be concerned about Kouji. Let’s split up and search for him.”

“No, I can’t trouble guests like yourselves with such things. Besides, it would be dangerous to wander around in the dark

when you aren't familiar with the building. Allow me to show you back to the annex. I'll bring you some beverages later."

Shimomura was absolutely right—however, this was a matter of life and death.

"In that case, could you show us to the parlor instead?"

"For what purpose?"

"We hadn't planned to sleep anyway, with a storm like this. I'm also worried about Kouji, so I was hoping you might let us pass the night in the parlor."

That was Shiroshi all over. Without missing a beat, he'd eloquently begun trying to persuade Shimomura. Seiji was cheering him on, when—

"Oh!" A thought occurred to him, and he spoke up in spite of himself. "Uh, what about Riko? If Kouji's missing, then is she also…?"

Just from that, Shiroshi seemed to pick up on what he meant.

On the nineteenth of August, a dismemberment will occur at Hotel Isola Bella.

A headless corpse had been found. The letter could either have been a prediction or a warning, and its sender had been Riko, not Kouji.

"I haven't yet visited the young mistress's room…" Even as Shimomura spoke, his face grew tense. "If you'll excuse me."

Turning on his heel, the butler started up the stairs almost at a run. Naturally, Seiji and Shiroshi followed him. Their destination proved to be a corner room of the second-floor gallery, where they'd seen Shimomura arguing with Kazusa earlier in the day.

With a metallic *jangle*, Shimomura took a bundle of keys from his coat and unlocked the door. Seiji and Shiroshi promptly stuck their heads out like a pair of turtles.

"Wait here, if you would," the butler told them, stepping inside. There was a *click*, and a dim light lit the room, coming from an emergency LED lantern that sat on the nightstand.

The space it revealed was surprisingly empty. There were no rugs on the beautiful parquet floor, most likely because they would have gotten in the way of the wheelchair, and the only real furniture was a canopy bed on the left.

And…

She's here!

Riko was in her wheelchair in the center of the room.

Thank goodness she's okay.

Her head was connected to her body, just the way it should be. Shimomura looked relieved as well.

Huh? She's not wearing the same thing she was this afternoon.

Someone must have changed her clothes. Riko's outfit had gone from that light summer dress to a long-sleeved blouse and corset skirt. She wore white gloves and boots, and the high collar of her blouse was adorned with an extravagantly frilled jabot held in place with a cameo brooch.

"Well. Should we take Riko to the parlor with us?"

"No, the young mistress will remain here. There's a rather troublesome situation in progress, and it's best to keep her in a room that can be locked."

Ah. He doesn't want Kazusa to see her.

"Just a moment, please," Shimomura said. He walked briskly to the back of the room, where there was a large window with the same sort of shutters as the ones in their guest room. Shimomura put a hand on the latch, making sure it was secured, then started back to Seiji and Shiroshi—but then he paused. He knelt in front of Riko's wheelchair and combed his fingers through her hair, then refastened the brooch at her neck.

There was deep affection in the way his fingers moved, as if he were a mother bird caring for a chick.

"If you ask me, it looks like he's playing with a doll," commented Shiroshi.

"Don't you think your perspective is a little twisted?" replied Seiji.

While they were whispering to each other, Shimomura rejoined them.

"Thank you for your patience. Allow me to show you to the parlor now."

They left Riko's room, locking the door behind them.

As they descended the great staircase by the light of their flashlights, they heard the muffled sound of the grandfather clock.

A single chime. It was one in the morning.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, combining with the echoes of the clock, and Seiji suddenly realized something.

Huh? Hey, I can't hear the rain anymore.

The wind seemed to have subsided as well. Were they now in the eye of the storm?

Suddenly, Shiroshi whispered in his ear.

"When we part with Shimomura in the parlor, let's go look for Kouji as well."

Great, yes, absolutely.

Seiji nodded back vigorously, but just then—

"Huh?"

He'd assumed the parlor would be deserted, but when they reached it, they found a lit emergency lantern and three figures: Kazusa, Shirou, and Aka.

The brothers were in the chairs in front of the fireplace, the contrast between them as stark as ever. Kazusa was sitting on his chair the wrong way, hugging its back like a bad-mannered middle schooler and sullenly drinking from a rocks glass. Shirou, on the other hand, had a business-use notebook computer open on his lap and was silently typing away.

Aka was behind the two, serving them diligently—or at least that was what he made look like as he played a game on his smartphone. Seiji honestly couldn't see him ever becoming a proper adult.

When the three new arrivals appeared, Kazusa gave them a dubious look.

"Look at you all, palling around together. Gross."

Right back at you, pal.

Maybe that thought had shown itself on Seiji's face, because Kazusa growled a little.

"Oh yeah, like I wanted this. I've got no clue why Shirou's here. And the kid over there's just slacking off. He's not gonna do any work; just fire the punk."

Seiji couldn't have agreed with him more.

"Then why *are* you here, Kazusa?" Shiroshi asked.

"I just…" Kazusa shrugged a little uncomfortably. "I had this really bad feeling. If I'm here, I'll know the second something happens."

I see. So it's about Riko.

Come to think of it, Hari's accident had also happened on the night of August 19. Kazusa had had a personal connection to that

incident, so maybe it was only natural for him to sense some sort of omen in this.

That's good, though. It means she has someone guarding her.

With a little sigh of relief, Seiji sat down on the couch next to Shiroshi.

Still…

Odoro was just snoring away in his room while his employer stood guard all night? His opinion of the detective couldn't get any lower.

"Not quite. He's right over there."

"Huh? Who's—? Bwah!"

There he was.

Odoro was lying on his back on a sofa he'd moved against the wall. He was wearing an eye mask.

"Heh-heh-heh. It does make one wish for a permanent marker, doesn't it?"

"Want me to run to our room and get one?"

The situation absolutely demanded they write "Meat" on his forehead.

"…I can hear you."

Odoro sat up, yanking off his eye mask.

Tch! Escaped by the skin of his teeth…

"Oh my, I'm sorry. Did we wake you?"

"No, I was keeping watch."

Huh. He sure looked like he'd been fast asleep.

"A certain individual's face struck me as familiar, you see. I believe he has deep ties to you. What's more, it should be impossible for him to be here."

"…I really don't know what you mean."

"I mean you won't be able to feign ignorance much longer. Whatever you're plotting, don't imagine you'll get away with it." Odoro's voice was low and threatening, and he glared at Shiroshi.

What's he talking about? Seiji wondered, but when he made eye contact with Shiroshi, all he got was an ambiguous wry smile that seemed to say, *That's a very good question.*

Hmm. He strongly suspected Shiroshi had dodged that one.

"By the way, Seiji, would you lend me your smartphone for a moment?"

There he goes again. It might be an employer privilege, but this had been happening at least twice a day lately. Reluctantly holding out his phone, Seiji was about to complain, *Don't you think you ask to borrow it a bit too often?*

"Oh!" He'd remembered. "Um, the browser won't launch right now."

"That's fine. I'm only sending a text."

Huh. That was unusual.

Puzzled, Seiji handed him the phone. Shiroshi promptly opened the messaging app and began tapping at the screen. Apparently, he didn't have flick input down yet.

He quickly hit send, but…

"Oh my, the base station has lost power as well? It seems my message will take a little time to arrive, then."

"Who did you send it to?"

"Heh-heh. You'll have to wait and see."

Oh, is that right?

Then, without bothering to check with Seiji, its rightful owner, Shiroshi slipped the phone into the breast of his kimono. He must have been waiting for a response to his text, but still, his *What's mine is mine, and what's yours is also mine* attitude hadn't changed.

A moment later…

"Would you care for a drink?" Shimomura asked, holding out a teacup. "You seemed fatigued, so I prepared an herbal tea. Chamomile and elderflower both have a calming effect."

Wisps of steam and a refreshing fragrance rose from the surface of the golden liquid. As Shimomura had said, it seemed to drain the tension from Seiji's shoulders.

Come to think of it, between getting lost in the mansion in the dead of night and stumbling over a headless corpse, he'd had a really rough day. His nerves might be more frayed than he'd realized.

Seiji took a sip. The tea was just the right temperature, and it spread a subtle warmth all the way through him and into his heart.

"This is delicious!"

"I'm pleased you like it."

Shimomura gave a gentle smile. He really was a curiously soothing person.

Then, out of nowhere…

Thunk.

The sound had come from somewhere above them.

It sounded as though someone had dropped a watermelon on the floor—heavy, dull, and *ominous*.

A ripple of tension immediately raced through the room.

"…What was that? Was it outside?" Shirou muttered.

"No, dumbass, it was above us!" Kazusa yelled sharply, leaping out of his chair. His movements were so agile, you never would have guessed he'd been drinking.

"Hey, wait! Shimomura's the only one with a key—"

"Dammit! Come on, old man, get the lead out!"

Shimomura hastily followed the brothers, and in the end, the whole group left the parlor. With Kazusa in the lead, they climbed the great staircase in the entrance hall.

No sooner had they reached the second-floor gallery than Aka, who was bringing up the rear, sniffed audibly. "I smell blood." He licked his lips slightly, like a cat who'd spotted its prey.

It can't be… Riko was fine just half an hour ago.

"The door's still locked. Nothing on this side suggests anything is wrong."

"It better not be! Hey, open it up, old man!"

Shimomura unlocked the door, his face tense, and Kazusa bolted inside.

"Riko!"

Seiji followed a moment later—and immediately gagged.

The room really did smell intensely of blood.

The power was still out, and in the darkness, the roar of the churning wind sounded unexpectedly close. Was the window open?

Where is she?

The wheelchair was in the center of the room, where it had been earlier, yet he couldn't see Riko's head over its back.

"Riko, where are you?!"

A moment later…

Kazusa stormed into the room, and the sole of his shoe made an unpleasant noise, as if he'd stepped in a puddle. The floor seemed to be covered with some sort of liquid.

"No…," he murmured, his voice trembling.

The lights suddenly came to life again; power had been restored. As soon as the state of the room was revealed, everyone froze, paralyzed.

"Huh?"

They were staring at an enormous pool of blood.

In the center of the parquet floor was an ominous crimson circle about three meters across. And, at the foot of the wheelchair lay…

"No. This can't be real."

It was Riko's severed head.

Her eyelids were slightly open. The eyes beneath them looked like translucent glass orbs, as if she was something artificial, a wax figure. However, the dried blood caked on the cut through her neck made it all too clear that the head had once belonged to a living person.

And what's more…

Her body's…gone?

The only thing in the wheelchair was a heap of bloody clothes. The body wearing them seemed to have vanished like smoke.

"Her body from the neck down doesn't seem to be here. Did the killer take it with him?" Shiroshi mumbled offhandedly. And then—

"…Riko," said a thin, weak voice. It was Kazusa.

Dazed, he took a step into the pool of blood.

"Don't," Shirou said, grabbing his arm to stop him. But Kazusa violently shook him off and walked right up to the head—where he sank to his knees, as if all the strength had left his legs.

His nerves seemed to fall to pieces the moment he tried to reach out for the head.

…I can't watch this.

Seiji averted his eyes, when all of a sudden—

"Eeek!"

Shimomura let out a piercing shriek. He was standing there, stunned, holding Riko's bloody clothes he'd scooped off the wheelchair.

And…

“No…”

A little finger lay on the seat.

The cut surface was clotted with dark dried blood, and near the base of the finger was a small mark that looked like a red ink stain. It might have been a burn scar.

“…That’s Riko’s finger.” Kazusa groaned. His voice sounded hollow.

Shimomura immediately staggered out of the room. Through the door, they heard the sound of retching, then stifled sobs. Someone should probably have gone out to be with him, but what could anyone say in a situation like this?

Then…

“It’s just like that tale from the *Nihon Ryouiki*,” Shiroshi murmured. “The woman who was taken and devoured by a wicked *oni*.”

What was he talking about?

“The *Nihon Ryouiki* is a collection of Buddhist stories that were compiled in the Heian period. The thirty-third tale in its second section deals with the victim of an *oni*. An incredibly beautiful woman named Yorozu-no-ko is killed and devoured by an *oni* that had disguised itself as a human man. All that remain are her head and little finger.”

Oh. That really did sound just like this.

Then, out of nowhere, Shiroshi quietly began to sing what sounded like a children’s song.

Who would have thee as his bride? Why, scores of men, that is to say: “Yorozu-no-ko.”

Ah, how perilous thou seem’st. Hold thou the sake and drink of it.

The mountain saint recites the scriptures. Truly, truly, ’tis a pity.

“That song was popular among the commonfolk before the *oni* incident. Long ago, children’s songs were called ‘*waza-uta*,’ or ‘miracle songs.’ Songs whose creators were unknown that became popular were considered prophecies made by the gods borrowing the tongues of humans.”

Oh, I see. The song foretold disaster, so in that way, it was sort of like the spirit photograph.

"Was it the work of a god, or the mischief of an *oni*? The original text wonders whether it was 'God or a demon?' but in the modern era, it's considered to be the tale of a man-eating *oni*."

"Um, when you say '*oni*,' you mean those ones with the horns and tiger-skin loincloths, with bright red faces?"

"Heh-heh. Some say that visual was invented in the early 1500s by Kanou Motonobu, a Muromachi-period painter. The word '*oni*' originally came from the word '*onu*,' meaning 'hidden.' In other words, an *oni* was something unseen."

"Huh? Then how did they know an *oni* did it?"

"Well, let's see. As monsters, the distinguishing feature of *oni* is the fact that they devour humans. However, there is a theory that they were invented to explain incidents where people were mauled to death by wolves or dogs."

"Meaning…?"

"In the Middle Ages, it was far more common for humans to be eaten by wild animals than it is today. However, their victims were almost always the infirm, travelers who'd collapsed on the road, or abandoned infants and elders."

Hmm. Seiji thought he probably would've gotten eaten as well.

"When people who didn't fall into one of these categories were killed by wolves or dogs and people saw their brutalized corpse, it would bring to mind an *oni*. They'd wonder, 'What on earth could have done this? If it wasn't a wolf or a dog, then…,' and looked to *oni* for the cause."

"But, I mean, looking at it from the *oni*'s point of view, that's a false charge."

"Heh-heh. Yes, that's true. 'And thus, he said it was an *oni*.' People have a tendency to blindly fear what they don't understand. By calling it the work of an *oni*, it became something they could explain. Shuten-douji and Tsuchigumo—the *oni* said to have been slain by Minamoto no Yorimitsu—are believed to have been powerful local clan leaders who refused to submit to the rule of the imperial court."

That made sense. As Seiji was listening and nodding, he heard Shiroshi murmur something to himself.

“No doubt I am an *oni* as well. Both to humans and to supernaturals.”

It sounded too lonely to be called self-mockery.

“Um, Shiroshi—?”

But just as Seiji started to speak up…

“Now we really should inspect the scene. Odoro appears to have finished quite some time ago.”

“S-say that sooner!”

Seiji felt a sudden, cold gaze on him and glanced behind him. In front of the others, Aka seemed to be pretending he didn’t know the two of them, but he was glaring at Seiji.

…Th-that’s not good.

“Um, the window’s open. Do you think that’s how the killer escaped?”

Covering for himself by saying something that sounded about right, Seiji stuck his head out the window. Instantly, a blast of damp wind struck him full in the face, but the rain he’d been bracing for didn’t come. It seemed they really had entered the eye of the storm.

And…

“Gah!”

“Heh-heh-heh. No, he really can’t have escaped that way.”

The light from the phone had revealed a sheer precipice, worn into sharp points here and there by the crashing waves. From what Seiji could see, there were no footholds, and no projections to hook a rope onto. It would have been impossible to climb down.

“If you fell from here, you’d die for sure, huh?”

The light glinted off the crests of the waves, which looked like the jaws of some enormous monster. If you were careless enough to let them swallow you, that would be that—they’d drag you right down to the ocean floor, and you might never surface again.

And then…

“Hmm? What are you doing?”

“Oh, the nearest shutter caught my attention.”

Like the ones in their guest room in the annex, the shutters here were two panels that opened inward. They were made of solid oak and latched with a hook in the center.

They'd been closed when he'd seen them earlier, meaning the killer had probably opened them. Yet Seiji didn't see any handprints or bloodstains on them, or anything else out of the ordinary.

"Look, do you see how there's water dripping from the bottom?"

"Oh, you're right. The rain got the inside of the room wet."

Shiroshi put a hand to his chin, apparently deep in thought.

"Why don't we take a look at the window behind them as well?"

It was the type of window that opened to the side, with one pane of glass sliding behind the other. The left-hand side was standing open, exposing a square patch of darkness.

"Neither the left nor right panes are wet on the side facing the room, correct?"

"…Yeah, seems so."

"What about the outside?"

As prompted, Seiji leaned out the window again. "Um, the left side's wet."

"And the right?"

"Hang on a sec… Nope. It's bone dry."

Shiroshi crossed his arms, thinking. Then he tilted his head to one side.

"That's very strange indeed."

"Huh? But, I mean, the left side was open, so it covered the right pane. There's no way it could have gotten wet, right?"

"Heh-heh-heh. You would say that, Seiji." Shiroshi looked at him with pity and patted him on the head.

…Seiji had the overwhelming urge to bite him. Was that an impulse he should fight?

Just then…

Huh? Actually, speaking of weird things…

His heart thumped.

Seiji realized something. He really should have picked up on it long before now.

"Um, did this happen in a locked room?"

"Oh?" Shiroshi said, blinking in surprise. "What makes you think that?"

“Well, the door was locked, wasn’t it? Which means the only way the killer could have gotten out was the window, but there’s a sheer cliff—”

Kazusa interrupted before he could finish.

“Don’t be an idiot. You’re forgetting someone pretty damn important,” he spat. His eyes were surprisingly dry, and there was a savage light in them. “Kouji! Riko’s old man! He’s got a key to every room in this place!”

That was true; if Kouji was the killer, then a locked room wasn’t even a possibility.

Except…

“Allow me to go through a few things first,” Shiroshi said to Kazusa. “Seiji, Shimomura, and I last confirmed that Riko was safe at one this morning. We joined you and the others immediately after that. Were the four of you in the parlor the whole time?”

“Yeah, for an hour before that, at least. And the kid got there about half an hour ahead of you.”

“I see. It was about half past one when we heard that noise from Riko’s room, at which point all seven of us were gathered in the parlor. In other words, that corroborates our alibis.”

That left Kouji as the only possible killer.

But…

“Dammit, where’d he go?! I’ll drag him out here and kill him!”

“You idiot!” snapped Shirou. “Don’t tell me you’re planning to go alone! You’re hunting an armed murderer!”

“Shove it!”

The brothers shouted at each other furiously.

As he listened to their yells, Seiji’s heart began to pound violently. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth, and he couldn’t get it unglued. He cleared his parched throat, then swallowed hard.

“But Kouji is—”

Dead. Not even just “dead”—a headless corpse.

He caught himself before he said it, swallowing the words back down.

After all, there was no body.

What’s more, if the corpse Seiji had seen was real, it would mean Kouji had already been dead when Riko was killed.

In other words, the criminal who'd killed both of them was one of the seven people there.

And yet…

"How do they look?" Shiroshi whispered in his ear. "Your left eye, Seiji. Have any of the other five become a yokai?"

Yeah, he was right.

There was definitely a man-eating *oni* among them.

And yet…

"No."

It took Seiji a little while to say the answer aloud.

He shook his head, completely at a loss, and finally managed to get the words out.

"Not one person here looks like a yokai."

Shiroshi's response a few moments later was all too predictable.

"My, my."

…I knew it.

*

It was a headache-inducing situation.

If Seiji's left eye could be trusted, then none of the seven people there was Riko's killer. The murderer had to be Kouji, the only one of them without an alibi. Yet that didn't add up, either; Seiji had seen Kouji's headless corpse before they'd found Riko's severed head.

In other words, no matter which piece of information was correct, the other had to be wrong.

Did that injury two weeks ago really stop my left eye from working?

Another possibility was…

"Could someone else, an outsider, be lurking on the island?" Shiroshi asked.

"There's almost no chance of that. If any suspicious persons had infiltrated the island, the outdoor sensors would have responded and activated the mansion's alarm system."

Shimomura, who was seated on a couch, shook his head gravely. His hands, resting between his knees, still trembled pitifully.

“This was a famous photography spot for years, and we still receive frequent unannounced visitors. As a result, on Master Kouji’s instructions…”

The boat landing in the inlet was also kept under surveillance, of course.

So that’s how he knew to come meet us right after the water taxi dropped us off.

Since the island was surrounded by sheer cliffs, infiltrating by any other route was essentially impossible. For better or worse, they seemed to have ruled out the possibility of there being an outside culprit.

Then Shiroshi whispered in his ear.

“The security here is far too good.”

It really was; the place felt like a prison. It was more as if it was meant to keep someone from escaping than to prevent people from getting in.

“In any case, all we can do for now is wait,” Shiroshi murmured, and Shimomura’s head slumped weakly.

It was half past three in the morning, and they were in the parlor on the first floor of the main building.

Earlier…

They had reported the crime to the police, but the typhoon was going to delay their arrival until dawn, just as they’d thought. The group sealed the room where the incident had occurred, and a manhunt had begun, led by Kazusa.

They’d gone around checking every nook and cranny in the mansion, even under the beds and in the bathtubs, yet after all that, they hadn’t found a trace of Kouji’s presence, let alone the man himself.

Exhausted, Seiji and Shiroshi had returned to the parlor with Aka, who’d brazenly slipped out. Kazusa, Shirou, and Odoro were planning to continue the search.

While this was going on, Shimomura had been resting in the parlor, feeling unwell. No sooner had Seiji and Shiroshi returned than he’d tried to make them tea, but they’d hastily stopped him. He really was a butler to the core.

“I hope they find Kouji soon,” Seiji murmured absentmindedly.

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me you actually mean that,” Aka said, clearly mocking him. Seiji shot him an irritated glare, but the kid

just gave him a half smile and shrugged. “I mean, he’s dead already.”

“Huh?”

Wait a second.

Aka shouldn’t know about Kouji’s headless corpse.

“Um, how—?” Seiji started to say, but just then, the door flew open with a *bang*.

Kazusa appeared wearing a raincoat, while Shirou trailed behind him, looking weary and haggard. Both men seemed to have aged ten years since the start of the night.

Stalking over to Shimomura, Kazusa hauled him up by his shirtfront.

“Hey, cut that out!”

Shirou hastily tried to stop him, but Kazusa ignored the other man and shook the butler with all his might.

“Where’s the secret room?!” he roared, sounding like a wild beast. “The one that pervert said he built here, ages back! We’ve looked everywhere and haven’t found him, so he’s gotta be holed up there!”

There was a bloodcurdling look in his eye.

If Kouji had materialized right now, Kazusa seemed liable to beat him to death.

“I’ve heard the rumors, but Master Kouji never once mentioned—”

“Like I’d believe that!” bellowed Kazusa.

Unable to stand by and watch any longer, Shirou tore his brother’s hands off Shimomura.

“Enough! Are you planning to become a murderer next?!”

“I don’t wanna hear it! Just shut your mouth!”

Then, out of nowhere, Aka burst out laughing. He snickered, his shoulders quivering, as if he couldn’t help himself.

“Oh, come on! You’re all being stupid. You want to know where Kouji is? Probably in Hell’s first district by now, don’t you think?”

“Huh? Hey, kid, what’re you—?”

“I mean, he left a severed head at the crime scene and even locked the door from the inside; he might as well have said, ‘I did it.’ It means he wasn’t planning to run or hide… And yet you can’t find him.”

Aka was talking big, as if he understood everything. The fact that his voice sounded so innocent made it all the more ominous.

“Don’t you think it’s obvious he threw himself out the window?”

For a moment, everyone stopped breathing.

Oh, I see.

That dark window standing wide open over the cliff.

Had the murderer sought refuge in the very blackness beyond it?

That is to say—had he killed himself ?

“…Oh my, someone just received a message. That’s your phone, isn’t it, Shimomura?”

Seiji could hear the smartphone in the butler’s breast pocket vibrating, just as Shiroshi had said. The man hastily took it out, and his eyes widened.

“…Master Kouji.”

Instantly, the air became tense.

Shimomura opened the text with trembling hands, then fumbled the phone and dropped it with a *clunk*. His face had gone as white as a sheet of paper.

“’Scuse me.” Aka quickly scooped up the phone. He scrolled down the screen, nodding to himself as he did. “Um, it’s a will.”

“Huh?!” Kazusa yelled, snatching the phone away, but Aka just gave him a casual shrug.

“It was sent at half past one, exactly when we heard the noise from the second floor. It says—”

It was a confession—in both the criminal and religious sense—as well as the ravings of a madman.

According to the will…

Everything had begun with Hari’s accident ten years ago, just as they’d assumed.

Or—could it even be called an “accident”?

On that stormy night, Hari had been having a nightcap in their bedroom when, spurred on by the alcohol, she’d finally raised the topic of divorce with her husband. Kouji had flown into a rage and started to get physically violent, so Hari had tried to flee downstairs. She’d slipped on the great staircase in the entrance hall, and the fall had proved fatal.

However, the tragedy hadn’t ended there.

Riko had been there, and she'd seen the whole thing.

"Dad, it's your fault Mom died! You're a murderer!"

The next thing Kouji knew, he'd clapped a hand over Riko's mouth. It was only when Dr. Hagi had come running that he'd realized it was dangerous, and that he might be suffocating her.

Riko had lived.

But she'd died inside.

Dr. Hagi had diagnosed her with dissociative stupor and desperately hidden the fact that it had been caused by her own father being seconds away from killing her.

Ten years later…

The time had passed, but Riko's mind hadn't returned.

To Kouji, that time had been sheer bliss.

"By losing her mind, Riko had become complete at last. Now she was simply one of my works of art."

So he'd said in his will.

Then, before the detective summoned by Kazusa could expose his crime, Kouji had made their relationship eternal: He'd leaped into the stormy ocean, taking Riko with him.

But not all of her…

"I leave behind Riko's head and the little finger of her left hand—her only imperfection. I've locked the door, so please collect them before my nephews notice. I would like you to throw the finger away. If you can, preserve the head in formalin and keep it close by. It is, after all, my final work as a dollmaker."

The text message ended there, and the room fell quiet.

It was the sort of silence that made one hesitant even to breathe.

"That finger…," Kazusa said quietly, as if he were forcing the air from his reluctant lungs. "Riko burned it herself when she was a kid. She was rebelling against her dad, who treated her like a doll. She said that as long as she had that scar, she was her own person, not some stupid…doll…"

His voice had begun to tremble halfway through, and it eventually trailed off.

He covered his face, as if clawing at his eyes.

"Dammit to Hell!"

Kazusa bit back sobs, and his muttered words were more pitiful than the wail of an animal.

And so the curtain fell on the incident with the death of the maker of living dolls.

*

Outside, the storm raged on.

Yet a stillness surrounded Hotel Isola Bella that made it almost seem deserted.

In the space of a single night, the island had lost two of its residents.

One had been the victim of a murder. The other, her murderer—who had then committed suicide.

In the end, the man had fallen into Hell of his own accord, without even waiting for the two princes of the demon realm to hand down judgment. It had turned out to be a fool's errand not just for Odoro and Shiroshi, the two competitors, but also for Takamura, the referee. Would it be declared a tie?

No, it's not about that.

Whether a criminal went to Hell or not fundamentally meant nothing to their victims.

They'd been killed; they were dead—they'd never come back. No matter what, there was nothing they could do to change that.

Even so…

An ending like this is just too cruel.

Seiji let out a sigh. He'd done that so many times by now, he'd lost count.

"All right, Seiji. Shall we resume the investigation?"

…*Hm?* He thought he'd heard something strange.

"Huh? W-wait a minute! What investigation? Kouji's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. However, he was not the true culprit."

"Whaaa—?!" Seiji yelled before he could stop himself.

"Oh, absolutely. That's what I think, too!"

Before he realized it, Aka was right in front of them, beaming. Shimomura, the boy's employer, had gone to his room to rest, so it seemed Aka had stopped pretending he didn't know them.

"Are you going to the crime scene? You are, aren't you? I'm coming with you, of course!"

How—*why*—had things ended up like this?

Seiji and Shiroshi headed for the second floor, taking the gleeful Aka with them.

“Ugh, that smell… Still, it doesn’t look like anything’s changed since earlier.”

The crime scene was being preserved for the police, who wouldn’t get there until later. They’d closed the shutters tight to keep the rain from getting in, but aside from that, everything was exactly as it had been when they’d last seen it.

The slick reflection of the ceiling lights in the pool of dark blood made the sight even more sickening.

And…

“First of all. I believe Kouji’s will was a counterfeit,” Shiroshi began, taking a slow look around the room. “There are too many unnatural aspects to the crime scene for the contents of that message to be true. Now, can you tell me specifically what they are?”

“Yes!” Aka’s hand shot up. They were basically just pretending to be in school. “The blood, for one thing! It’s in a neat circle, with the wheelchair at the center. It’s a little *too* neat, though.”

He sounded as if he’d been waiting for a chance to point that out. He spoke smoothly in a way that resembled Shiroshi—unsurprising, seeing as they were brothers.

“If someone chopped off her head in here while she was still alive, there should be bloodstains on the walls and ceiling, too, right? Not only that, but I don’t see any footprints or handprints.”

He was right.

If the murder had happened just like the will said, Kouji had cut off Riko’s head here in this room, then thrown himself out of the window with her naked body—no doubt with his hands and feet still covered in blood.

…And yet there were no bloodstains on the floor, the ceiling, or even the window frame. That was weird, no matter how you looked at it.

“Also, the puddle of blood on the floor hasn’t congealed at all, but look: The blood on the neck is all dark and coagulated. Doesn’t that mean it has sodium citrate or something mixed into it to stop it from clotting?”

“S-sodium what…?” Seiji asked, bewildered.

Shiroshi chimed in with an explanation. “Sodium citrate. It’s an anticoagulant used in blood tests. When you’re wounded, a scab forms to stop the bleeding, yes? That happens because your blood coagulates. Sodium citrate is used to stop that reaction.”

Apparently, the role of explainer had passed from the younger brother to the older one.

“Taking this into consideration, it’s highly likely that the blood forming this puddle was procured beforehand as a prop. Originally, it may have been intended to be used for a blood transfusion.”

“But why would someone do that?”

“The first thing we can say is that Riko was most likely not killed in this room; she was murdered elsewhere, then carried here. The pool of blood on the floor was meant to disguise that fact.”

“Um, but wouldn’t that have been kind of impossible…?” Seiji interrupted, calling for a time-out. “You and I came here with Shimomura and saw Riko at around one, and she was fine, remember? Then we discovered her head at half past one—That’s just thirty minutes. You mean somebody took Riko from this room, killed her, then brought her back, all in half an hour?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Yes, you would say that, Seiji.”

“Huh? But, I mean, there’s no other way they could have… No—all seven of us have an alibi, so the killer would have to be Kouji…” Groaning, Seiji clutched at his muddled head, which Shiroshi took the opportunity to pat.

“Here, let me tell you the answer, then. When we last saw Riko, at one in the morning, she’d already been killed. What we saw was *Riko’s corpse*.”

That’s insane, Seiji wanted to say, but he couldn’t make a sound. It felt as if someone was choking him.

Unable to watch any longer, Shiroshi held up a finger.

“Think back, if you would. When we saw Riko, there was something unnatural about her, wasn’t there?”

“Huh? What was?”

“Her clothes. During the day, Riko was wearing a summer dress with short sleeves, yet when we saw her, she was wearing something completely different: a long-sleeved blouse and corset

skirt. Extremely inappropriate attire for a night when a power outage meant there was no air-conditioning."

He had a point there. Riko had seemed so much like a doll that it hadn't struck Seiji as odd, but a normal person would have gotten heatstroke.

"Why did someone go out of their way to dress Riko like that? Most likely because they were using that outfit that revealed very little to hide its contents."

…What did Shiroshi mean by "contents"?

"In short, when we last saw Riko, her torso was actually a human-shaped vessel filled with blood—a water pack in the form of a mannequin."

So basically a person-shaped water balloon? It hadn't been filled with water, though, but blood mixed with an anticoagulant.

If someone had posed that in a wheelchair like a mannequin, then disguised it with a long-sleeved blouse and corset skirt… *Yeah, from a distance, it probably wouldn't have looked like there was anything wrong with it.*

Still, Seiji didn't want to believe it was true. Only a demon would do something like that.

Aka, who'd been nodding along as Shiroshi explained his deduction, suddenly clapped his hands.

"Oh, I see! The density of blood is roughly one cubic centimeter per gram. Riko was about a hundred and fifty centimeters tall, and if we estimate her weight at forty kilograms, the total volume of her body would be forty liters… Yes, that's almost exactly this amount." There was a note of amazement in his voice.

Seiji would have loved to know how Aka was able to eyeball an amount of blood in liters, but he decided it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

"But even if they could fake her body that way, what about her face?"

"Oh, they could just use the real one," Aka said with a casual shrug. "The murderer severed Riko's head somewhere else, then attached it to the top of an artificial torso. Of course, it would have been drained of blood, and if they packed her nose and ears with something, they could also prevent other fluids from leaking out. Not only that, but the power was out, so the room was dim.

As long as no one noticed the smell of the corpse, I think it would be possible to deceive observers."

For a moment, Seiji's mind went completely blank.

Drained of blood, *fluids leaking out*, *the smell of the corpse*— The second he processed those words, Seiji felt his stomach turn inside out. Nausea surged through him, and he clapped a hand over his mouth.

However, Aka just ignored him. "I bet the blouse with that stuffy high collar and jabot were to hide the connection between the head and the torso. Then, as the finishing touch, the criminal used a needle or something to poke a hole in the body. The liquid seeped out, and the vessel gradually caved in like a shriveled-up water balloon. Finally, the head lost its support and rolled off the wheelchair, at which point—"

Thunk. It had struck the floor.

So the noise they'd heard upstairs at one thirty, while Seiji had been savoring Shimomura's herbal tea, had been Riko's severed head hitting the floor.

"Next, the window," Shiroshi said from beside him, picking up the thread of the conversation. "When we first visited the room, the inner shutters were tightly closed. Yet thirty minutes later, when we discovered Riko's head, they were wide open, as was the left side of the window behind them. From those observations, it was speculated that during the thirty minutes we were all in the parlor, someone had infiltrated the room, killed Riko, and opened the window. However…"

"Huh? That's not what happened?"

"The absence of bloodstains on the window really is very unnatural. One other thing also struck me as odd: the way the window was wet."

"Oh."

Come to think of it, Shiroshi had seemed particularly interested in that.

"Now, here's a question for you: For the thirty minutes between one and half past one, we were in the eye of the typhoon, meaning there was a lull in the rain. If the murderer had opened the window during that time, how do you suppose the outer surfaces of the window and the shutters behind them would have gotten wet?"

“Huh? What do you mean ‘how’?”

Seiji didn’t even have to think about it.

The windows had been exposed to the driving rain right up until they entered the eye of the typhoon. Naturally, the outside of the glass would have been soaked, while the surfaces facing the room would be dry. There was no way the shutters could have gotten wet—

Hmm? Hang on.

Seiji’s eyes went wide with astonishment.

“Exactly. The opposite was true,” Shiroshi said with a nod. “It was as you saw when I had you look earlier: The shutters, which wouldn’t ordinarily have been wet, were dripping on the floor. This means that the window had actually been open when it should have been closed, and since only the left-hand pane was wet, it had been that way since before the rain began.”

Oh, I get it.

Shiroshi was right: If the left side of the window had been open before the rain started to fall, it would have covered the right windowpane and kept it dry.

Except…

“Hang on! When we saw Riko at one, the window was closed…”

“Yes—but only the shutters. When we saw that the shutters were closed, it led us to infer that the window behind them was locked as well.”

That made sense. The shutters in this room were sturdy oak panels; if they’d been closed all the way and latched with the hook, there would have been no need to worry about wind and rain blowing in through the cracks, even if the window behind them had been open.

“Now, on to my conclusion. I believe that the culprit waited until we’d entered the eye of the typhoon, then quietly undid the latch on the shutters while pretending to make sure they were locked. With the latch undone, the shutters would open on their own even if there was no one in the room, when we left the eye of the typhoon or the wind changed directions.”

Oh, of course.

Seiji remembered that, when he’d leaned out the window after they’d discovered the severed head, a gust of wind had hit him

directly in the face. That wind had been the accomplice that had secretly flung the shutters open.

“But in that case…”

His heart skipped a beat. If Shiroshi’s deduction was correct, then there was only one person who could have set this whole plan into motion.

“In summary, at one in the morning, the culprit did the following three things: First, he had those of us who were with him see that Riko was safe. Second, when we entered the eye of the typhoon, he undid the latch on the shutters on the pretense of making sure they were locked. And third, he pretended to refasten the brooch at Riko’s throat, then used it to puncture the fake torso.”

Finally…

Seiji managed to unstick his tongue from the roof of his mouth, and he swallowed hard.

“No way… You’re saying the killer is Shimomura?”

“Yes, improbable as it seems,” Shiroshi said quite easily. “If Shimomura was the murderer, then the reason he needed to cut off Riko’s head and little finger is clear as well. To borrow a term from stage magic, it was misdirection: a trick to distract his audience.”

“A-a distraction?”

“Simply put, it was a technique that allowed him to retrieve the prop he used for his magic trick. When we reached the scene of the crime, our attention was immediately drawn to the severed head on the floor. Shimomura took that opportunity to run to the wheelchair and snatch up the fully drained ‘blood doll,’ along with the clothing. He looked at the dismembered finger—which he’d placed on the seat ahead of time—and screamed, then used that opening to flee the scene.”

Right.

Back then, Shimomura *had* dashed out of the room, white-faced and carrying Riko’s clothes—and he hadn’t returned for quite a while.

Even afterward, he’d rested in the parlor by himself because he’d been feeling ill. He must have used that time to dispose of the clothing—the biggest piece of evidence.

Then, without warning…

“Great, that’s all sorted out!” Aka said with a snap of his fingers. “Well, that was over a lot faster than I expected. Now we just have to grab Shimomura! He should be resting in his room, but I bet he’s getting ready to make a break for it right about now. I’ll go look for him!”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Aka turned around and headed out of the room. Halfway to the door, he glanced back at Seiji with a smile.

“In any case, now you’ve seen that I’m more competent. Hopefully, it’ll help you learn your place. If you’d like to step down voluntarily, you’d better do it soon… Before you get put out with the rest of the trash on garbage day.”

His voice was light, musical, and mocking, and with those parting words to Seiji, Aka cheerfully left the room.

Just then…

“…Oh my, a text.”

Shiroshi took the smartphone out of his kimono. The message seemed to be a response to the one he’d sent earlier, and he skimmed it, then chuckled.

…There was something creepy about it.

Hmm? Wait a second.

Seiji recognized that expression.

He was pretty sure it was the one Shiroshi wore when he was plotting something.

“Sorry, but I’m going to keep your phone for a little while longer. It’s finally sending and receiving texts without issue. Oh, and it looks as though we may be able to use the internet again.”

“Ah— Right!”

He’d just remembered.

“Um, actually, there was something I wanted to show you.”

Not wanting to put it off any longer, Seiji took the smartphone and opened the occult forum from his browsing history. When he tapped the familiar URL, a sepia-toned two-page magazine spread appeared.

“My, my, could this be the infamous spirit photograph?”

“Yes, well… I guess you probably don’t need it anymore, though.”

Shiroshi took back the phone and gazed intently at the screen.

Then…

“Huh? Wh-what’s the matter?”

Shiroshi had abruptly lowered his head, and his shoulders had started to quiver. For a second, it had almost looked to Seiji as if he’d burst into tears, but…

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.”

Apparently, he was laughing.

…What do I do? He’s freaking me out.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Seiji.”

Seiji had never heard him sound so elated, and Shiroshi ruffled his hair.

“At the eleventh hour, you’ve snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.”

“Huh?”

“Thank you very much. You’ve given me the final piece of the puzzle.”

*

They headed for the library.

The unique scent of leather-bound books had accumulated like sediment in the hollow silence of the room. They stood there, in that very spot where Seiji had seen the headless corpse, and Shiroshi got right down to business.

“Now then, about the corpse you discovered. Let us start off by assuming that everything you saw was correct. That is to say, that when you lost your way at midnight, there truly was a headless corpse here.”

“Huh?” Seiji said, rather foolishly. “W-wait just a minute! Earlier, you said there weren’t any bloodstains on the walls or the floor, and that the carpet hadn’t been replaced.”

“Yes, and all those things are true…of what we can see now, at least.”

That sounded significant.

“First, let us review. You got lost on the way to the parlor when you heard a sound from beyond the door and wandered into the library. There, you saw a headless corpse lying in front of the grandfather clock, reflected in the mirror, and you took to your heels. Is that more or less what happened?”

“Pretty much.”

“In other words, Seiji, all you saw was the corpse’s reflection. You didn’t turn around and look at it directly.”

That seemed like a weird thing to say.

“It was reflected in the mirror, though. So it had to actually be there, right?”

“Heh-heh-heh. Perhaps…and perhaps not.” As Shiroshi spoke, he crossed to the mirror, then motioned for Seiji to join him. “Come, stand here one more time and tell me what you see in the reflection.”

Puzzled, Seiji trudged over to stand in front of the mirror.

He would have preferred never to look at the thing again, but this was an order from his boss; sometimes, you just didn’t have a choice. *Fine, bring it on*, he thought. Seiji screwed up his courage and looked straight at it.

“Um, I see me standing in front, the carpet on the floor, the bookshelves on the walls, and—”

His mouth fell open.

He’d realized what Shiroshi was trying to show him.

“Exactly. What you saw at midnight was technically impossible: You saw *the clock* reflected in the mirror. The two are directly opposite each other, so when you stand there, you’re directly between them. That means your body naturally obscures the clock, and it isn’t reflected in the mirror.”

He was right.

Standing there, looking straight into the mirror, Seiji couldn’t see the grandfather clock. Just as Shiroshi said, his body hid it completely.

“In other words, the mirror failed to reflect you, just like in that spirit photograph.”

There’s no way. He was about to deny it, when a sudden thought flashed through his mind.

No, it’s possible.

Seiji had sprinted out of the library the second he’d seen the headless corpse. Even if the mirror hadn’t been reflecting him, would he have noticed?

“Now then, how did this happen? The answer lies in this spirit photograph.”

Shiroshi held out the smartphone. It showed the two-page magazine spread Seiji had found: a single photograph shot at an

angle from behind a petite woman—Hari, most likely—who was standing in front of the library mirror.

“Does anything about that photo strike you as odd?” Shiroshi asked.

“No, except for the fact that Hari’s not reflected in the… Wait—Aaah!”

A second later, Seiji had seen it, too.

There was something clearly strange about the reflection of the clock in the mirror.

“Indeed; the numbers on the face. It’s a mirror image, and yet they’re in their proper places. The fact that they’re Roman numerals makes it difficult to notice at first glance, but while all the other furnishings are reversed, the clock is unchanged.”

“B-but how is that possible…?”

“You see, this photo is like a ‘spot the difference.’ What Kouji, the creator of the puzzle, had been hinting at was…”

As he spoke, Shiroshi had strode up to the clock, and he’d begun to probe its face with his fingers. There was a *click*, and his fingertip sank in as if he’d pressed a button. Then—

Creeeak.

Seiji turned, startled by a sudden noise, to see the mirror on the wall behind him swing outward like a door.

“Ugh!”

The moment the hidden door opened, an awful smell seemed to billow out from behind it: The stomach-churning stench of rotting blood.

And then…

“Huh?”

A cruelly decapitated white-furred wolf was lying on the floor. The moment Seiji blinked, it turned into a headless corpse in a jet-black robe.

It’s Kouji.

Yet what surprised him the most was—

“Wh-what is this?”

On the other side of the hidden door was a small room that was identical to the library. The dried spray of blood that stretched all the way to the ceiling declared with graphic eloquence that this had been the scene of the crime.

The bookshelves lining the walls, the grandfather clock with its swaying brass pendulum— No, on closer inspection, Seiji noticed that even the patterns on the wallpaper and carpet had been flipped left to right. It was a perfect recreation of the world in the mirror.

Perfect—except for the face of the clock.

“This was the secret room that Kouji built,” Shiroshi explained. “In essence, he disguised the trick door as a mirror, then created a reversed library behind it that appeared identical to the reflection.” He pointed to the spine of one of the books that lined the walls. “Ordinarily, the books in a library would have titles and authors on their covers, but Kouji omitted them for the sake of this room. In order to create the illusion that this was the world in the mirror, each individual letter would have had to be reversed, so stocking the library entirely with fake books was his only option.”

That makes sense. Still, this went way beyond being clever or eccentric— It was sheer lunacy.

“Kouji was fond of pranks, and he waited impatiently for his friends to begin searching for the secret room. However, contrary to his expectations, no one took him seriously, so an exasperated Kouji took this spirit photograph as a clue. The hint it held was this grandfather clock: He must have switched the position of each of the numbers to take the picture.”

Then, to create the illusion that the hidden room was the reflection in the mirror, he’d opened the trick door and taken the photo from the library side. By posing Hari in front of it, he made it look like a spirit photograph.

That meant that when Seiji had wandered in here earlier, the hidden door had been open.

“Huh? Then I wasn’t hallucinating?”

“No. You immediately suspected that your left eye wasn’t working properly, but you should have trusted it.”

“Oh, then, when did you realize my story might be true?”

“Honestly, from the very beginning.”

An involuntary “Huh?” escaped Seiji. Whatever response he’d been expecting, that hadn’t been it, and he stared at Shiroshi, startled.

“You see, I had decided I would believe what your left eye saw, exactly as you saw it, even if you doubted yourself. No matter how strange the things you see are, you’re not the sort of person who can cover them up or lie about them—so I decided to trust you.”

Shiroshi gave him a soft smile, like a white peony blooming.

“After all, you knew my first instinct would be to suspect your left eye wasn’t working properly, yet you didn’t attempt to lie. You were honest to a fault. That’s why, for as long as you remain my assistant, I will continue to believe you.”

For some strange reason, Seiji felt like he was going to cry.

Could it be…?

Maybe it was because the word “trust” was written with characters that meant “to believe in” and “to rely on” someone—two feelings that Seiji had almost never felt before in his life.

Even Inokoshi, his only friend—his best friend, he’d thought—had taken his own life without saying a word about his troubles to Seiji.

Still…

He’d wanted Inokoshi to believe in him.

He’d wanted him to rely on him.

Even if everything they tried ended up being useless, he wished his friend had given him a chance to struggle futilely alongside him.

Oh, I see.

Even now, after everything that had happened, Seiji still wished Inokoshi hadn’t died.

“Now then, Seiji,” Shiroshi said clapping his hands together lightly. His voice sounded as cheerful as ever. “We’ve found our headless corpse. Shall we return to the parlor and summon Kazusa and Shirou?”

Seiji tried to say, “All right,” but the words stuck in his throat.

He gritted his molars and furrowed his brow. Keeping his head down, Seiji nodded, then quickly turned around—and just once wiped the corners of his eyes on his shoulder.

I know.

It was too late to cry over Inokoshi.

*

“We found the secret room.”

When they told Kazusa in the parlor, he’d turned pale and rushed toward them.

And then…

“Huh?! You’ve got to be kidding! Why is he dead?!”

As soon as he saw the corpse in the hidden room, Kazusa let out a baffled yell. Shiroshi went through the steps of his deduction, but he groaned, aghast, and clutched at his head.

“That’s ridiculous. So, what, you’re saying old man Shimomura is the killer?”

Shirou, on the other hand, had absorbed the news surprisingly quickly. When he’d responded to their summons, there had been a hard-set look of suspicion in his eyes, yet now…

“We may be too late,” he said, blanching. “I heard he wasn’t feeling well, so I visited his room a short time ago. He wasn’t there.”

“Shit! He made a break for it, huh?! The waves are still high, so he probably hasn’t left the island. Let’s get out there and find him —”

“Wait, don’t be so impulsive! We should leave the rest to the police!”

“Shove it! Drop dead already!” Kazusa roared. He glared at the headless corpse at his feet with loathing. “Dammit, this is all his fault. If this bastard hadn’t gotten Hari killed…” Kazusa seemed as if he might send the corpse flying with a kick at any moment.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Shiroshi chided him. “This corpse isn’t Kouji’s.”

Kazusa looked at him blankly. So did Seiji and Shirou.

“The sex is wrong. This is a woman’s body.”

The words, *No, that can’t be right*, were halfway out of Seiji’s mouth when he noticed something: The body was lying on its back, and he could see the slight curve of breasts on its upper torso.

“Then who the hell—?!”

But Kazusa broke off midsentence, and all the blood drained from his face. His eyes were fixed on the corpse’s left hand, which had been stripped of its leather glove.

It was missing a finger.

The little finger of the left hand was gone, as if it had been cut off with a sharp blade.

No way.

The image of Riko's wheelchair sitting in that blood-soaked room rose in his mind's eye. Her severed, solitary finger on the seat…

"That's right. This is Riko."

For a moment, time seemed to stop.

Paying no heed to the stunned group, Shiroshi continued impassively.

"If a headless corpse and a severed head are discovered on the same night, the natural assumption to make is that they belong to the same individual. Both belonged to Riko."

"Hold it—just hang on! Then where'd that piece of shit go? Wait—first off, Riko wasn't this tall…"

Kazusa's complexion had turned ashen, and the confusion on his face was clear to see.

Shiroshi turned toward him and pointed to a spot on the floor. In the corner of the room, where the carpet didn't reach, was a trapdoor.

"I believe the answer to your question is down there."

Spurred on by Shiroshi's words, Kazusa grabbed the handles of the trapdoor and pulled the double doors open.

A deep, dark hole appeared from beyond them.

Narrow stairs led down into the hole, squeezed between concrete walls on both sides.

"What is this? Does this place have a basement?" Kazusa said, almost to himself.

"It's probably a remnant of the hotel's underground facilities. Come to think of it, this hidden room might have been built by remodeling the linen closet and laundry room. In which case…" Shirou took a penlight out of his breast pocket.

The group descended the stairs, with Shirou in the lead. At the bottom, they found a thick iron door spotted with red rust in places. It looked like it belonged in a ruin.

Kazusa swallowed a lump in his throat as he reached out for the doorknob.

"Hey, I think the lock's been broken…"

“Probably destroyed using a drill,” Shirou muttered. “It’s a technique often used by burglars. Strange door, though. It’s made to lock only from the outside.”

He carefully opened the door, stirring up a cloud of mold and dust that sent Seiji into a coughing fit.

And then…

“What is that?”

All four of them gulped as they saw what was illuminated by the penlight.

It was a mummy.

The corpse lay on its stomach with the back of its skull caved in. Its partially skeletonized hands and feet were as desiccated as twigs, and a black stain had formed beneath it from the liquid that seeped out when its flesh rotted away.

It appeared to have been a man, based on the clothes, but there was no way to tell what he’d looked like alive. His face was turned to the side, and they could see two cavities where his eyes had once been, gazing out hollowly at nothing.

“Oh, there’s a light switch. Shall we see if it still works?” Shiroshi said, doing things at his own speed as usual. A moment later, the incandescent ceiling light came on.

The small room it revealed looked like a cell.

Its only furnishings were a twin bed, a writing desk, and a closet. The floor was bare concrete, and in addition to the dusty mummy, it was littered with dead flies and moths.

“No… This place… Don’t tell me…”

When Seiji noticed the dresses hanging in the closet by the wall and the stuffed animal displayed on the desk, all the hair on his body stood on end.

Had this been a child’s room?

It seemed to have belonged to a teenage girl—here, underground, where the sun never reached.

“Hey. Look at this.”

Kazusa had picked up a school notebook from the desk. The cover was rough with gritty dust, and its owner’s name had been childishly scrawled on it in permanent marker.

Riko Ayatsuji.

“What the hell is this?” Kazusa’s voice trembled. He sounded delirious.

Shirou knelt on the floor, not caring that his designer suit would get dirty. He had a hand over his mouth as if fighting back nausea, and he leaned closer to the mummy.

“There’s a Gruen watch on its wrist. It’s a hand-wound antique—the one Uncle always wore. That means this corpse must belong to…”

It couldn’t be Kouji, could it?

“From the way his skull is caved in, he appears to have been bludgeoned to death. The weapon was most likely the lamp on the desk there; its base is stained with blood.”

“Wait, what does this even mean?” Kazusa shouted, still confused. “If he’s mummified, it’s not like he died in the last couple of days. He was alive right up until yester—”

Kazusa abruptly broke off midsentence.

“No…,” he muttered, lips pale and trembling.

Shiroshi nodded quietly. “That was Riko. The real Kouji died two years ago, and his daughter assumed his identity.”

For a second, Seiji thought he’d heard wrong.

But then Shiroshi leaned closer and whispered in his ear.

“Kaji-ga-baba was the hint. Stories that fit the ‘thousand wolves’ archetype vary by region; in some versions, the monster’s true form is an old cat or a demon hag. However, their endings all have one thing in common…”

When dawn came, the courier followed the bloodstains the white wolf had left until he reached the village of Sakihama. The trail ended in front of the blacksmith’s house.

He knocked on the door and called for the master of the house, who told him that an elderly woman belonging to the family had been badly wounded the previous night and was asleep inside. Realizing what she actually was, the courier cut the woman down, and she immediately transformed into the white-furred wolf.

They looked beneath the floorboards and found a veritable mountain of human bones, including those of the real old lady. For a long time, the white wolf had been passing itself off as the woman it had killed and eaten.

“That is to say, the characteristics of Kaji-ga-baba are ‘murder’ and ‘replacement.’ By becoming the person they killed, they are able to cover up the fact that a murder ever took place. In old stories, the body was hidden under the floor, but… Yes, in the modern age, that would be a basement,” Shiroshi murmured, sounding intrigued. His eyes were on the mummy at his feet.

His gaze soon moved to the stuffed animal on the desk, and those same eyes narrowed in pity.

“In all honesty, I realized someone might have taken his place as soon as you told me you’d seen Kaji-ga-baba. And at the same time, I thought it would have been difficult for anyone but Riko to do.”

In the end, that suspicion had been proved correct.

“Now then, let me begin with the conclusion I came to,” Shiroshi said, turning back to Kazusa and Shirou. “Riko had been imprisoned here ever since Hari’s accidental death ten years ago. Two years ago, she killed Kouji, her father, and took his place.”

He’d said it quite casually, and Shirou interrupted with a gasp.

“Wait just a minute. You claim Riko was confined here for ten years, but that’s impossible. We saw her on the island after the accident. How do you explain that?”

“A living doll. Kouji had retired as a dollmaker, but he had been secretly making a doll modeled on Riko. Ten years ago, when his actions resulted in Hari’s death and Riko witnessed it, he put a certain plan into action to keep her from talking: With Dr. Hagi’s cooperation, he switched Riko with the doll.”

Something Seiji had heard Kazusa say the day before rose to mind.

“I bet he wanted a doll for a daughter, not a human.”

Had he genuinely switched his only daughter for a doll?

“Naturally, the doll couldn’t talk or move, so her attending physicians, Hagi and Shimomura, deceived the rest of the world by falsifying a diagnosis of ‘dissociative stupor.’ ”

“No way. That’s ridiculous…”

“As far as Kouji was concerned, that spirit photograph was probably the greatest threat to him. What had once been a ‘spot the difference’ puzzle had become a clue to the place where Riko was imprisoned. I believe that’s why he made such a fuss over the magazine and had it recalled.”

“Wait, hang on!” Shirou interjected. “Anyone could see that Riko’s features changed from year to year. If that was a doll, wouldn’t her face have stayed the same as it was ten years a—?”

His face suddenly turned pale.

“Wait. No way…,” he murmured, his lips trembling so much, it looked like he’d received an electric shock.

“Yes. He continued to remodel the doll’s face to match the growth of the girl he’d imprisoned in the basement. In fact, it might be more accurate to think of it in terms of ‘needing Riko as a living model to bring his doll to maturity.’ It’s possible that he kept her alive for that reason alone,” Shiroshi said quietly.

“That’s insane,” Kazusa spat. But his voice was hollow.

“Why would he do something that awful?” Seiji murmured in spite of a social construct.

From what Kazusa had told them, Kouji and Riko had disliked each other since before Hari’s death. Still, anyone who could treat their own flesh-and-blood childlike that was inhuman. An *oni*.

“I believe the answer to that question can be found in Riko’s current form.”

“Huh?”

“Her height.” Shiroshi turned back to Kazusa and Shirou. “You’re both quite tall, aren’t you? Whose genetics were those?”

“Our grandmother was a Russian stage actress; apparently, she was 180 centimeters tall. Grandfather fell in love with her at first sight while studying abroad in Europe, but she died young.”

Aha. That made Kazusa, Shirou, and Riko all a quarter Russian.

“Riko’s imprisonment began when she was ten years old—the age when secondary sex characteristics begin to appear and children grow rapidly. You said Riko’s clashes with Kouji grew more pronounced then, didn’t you? I think her height may have been part of the reason.”

Seiji wanted to reject that idea, but he couldn’t get the words out.

Thinking back, Hari had looked quite petite in the spirit photograph. Kouji had been a dollmaker, and if that was what he’d considered the feminine ideal…

“During a growth spurt, children can grow nearly twenty centimeters over the course of a single summer. Although the

growth of their child should be a source of joy for any father, no doubt Kouji couldn't abide the fact that his 'greatest masterpiece' was getting further and further away from his ideal. And Riko had the misfortune of taking after her father and stage actress grandmother; by the time she'd finished growing, she was the same height as Kouji."

Eventually, he'd imprisoned his daughter—now considered a "failed work," as far as he was concerned—in the basement.

"Ultimately, two 'replacements' occurred at Hotel Isola Bella: In the first, a doll replaced a girl, while in the second, a daughter replaced her father."

At Shiroshi's words, the other three stared at the mummy on the floor—Kouji's corpse, with its all-too-vividly bashed-in skull.

"The second replacement likely occurred two years ago, when Kouji dismissed all the servants who didn't live on the island and began disguising himself with a robe and mask. Riko had taken Kouji's place and was trying to cover up that fact."

"But…," Seiji interrupted, "would that have been possible? Maybe she could fake his appearance, but she couldn't change her voice. Wouldn't people have caught on as soon as she spoke?"

"Indeed. Riko was eighteen at the time, so in order to pass herself off as Kouji, she needed Shimomura's help. In other words, Riko and Shimomura have been accomplices for two years, ever since Kouji's murder."

"You don't think…?" Shirou murmured. His gaze wandered uneasily, as if he was hesitant to say the rest. "Could Shimomura have incited Riko…to kill her father?"

"Oh my, is something on your mind?"

Shirou exhaled, steeling himself.

"…The truth is, before I came to the island, I had Shimomura's background professionally investigated."

"Huh?! Hang on a second! Why would *you* do something like that?!" Kazusa's eyes widened in shock.

Shirou looked away uncomfortably. "You aren't the only one of Riko's cousins concerned about her. I thought Shimomura might be doing something illegal in regard to her care. That he might be colluding with Uncle to keep her close to him as a doll."

As a result…

Shirou had learned that Shimomura really had once run a clinic in Tokyo. He'd first met Kouji when Dr. Hagi—an old acquaintance of his—had asked him to conduct an examination in his place while he was away on a trip back home.

"Shimomura has Japanese citizenship, but he was born in England. His mother was Japanese, his father was British, and he had an older twin brother. Their parents died in quick succession, so he was adopted by a married uncle on his mother's side. The uncle and his wife wouldn't foster his older brother, however, so he was sent to a child welfare facility, but…" Shirou's voice trailed off, and he cleared his throat. "He ran away from the facility when he was twelve and was arrested for murder at twenty-eight. Apparently, he'd killed eighteen Asian girls and preserved them in formalin."

"…Huh?"

Since England had abolished capital punishment, he'd been sentenced to life imprisonment but had killed himself in jail less than two years into his sentence.

"B-but that was his brother, and they hadn't seen each other in years, right?" commented Seiji. "That's got nothing to do with Shimomura…"

"No, we can't be sure of that," said Shirou. "During the two years before he died, the brother was interviewed by a certain criminal psychologist. There was something he said in that interview that tugged at the back of my mind."

When the brothers were young, their mother—who'd been a tyrant at home—had drowned in the bath while drunk. Her corpse had gradually turned to wax, and for a full six months, the brothers had lived with her as "a family of three."

"Every night, my younger brother and I would hold hands and go to kiss our mother's forehead under the bathwater. Since then, I've only been able to love dolls. That's why I killed those girls: to turn them into dolls. I don't know where my brother is now, but I bet he feels the same way."

Shirou had saved that passage from the English-language interview on his phone.

"No way…" Seiji shuddered, horrified. It felt as if the temperature in the room had plummeted. Kazusa was also pale; he looked as if he had a lump of ice lodged in his throat.

Only Shiroshi's tone was unchanged.

"Necrophilia—a sexual attraction to corpses. The Freudian school claims it begins with affection felt for one's sleeping mother in early childhood, and that that affection is subsequently converted into desire. I see… Like corpses, dolls have no human warmth. Neither has a mind or an intellect of their own; they're eternally passive beings."

Shirou nodded, his face tense. "It's true that Shimomura wasn't directly involved. That said, it's possible he had something to do with a separate murder that brought him to this island."

"How do you mean?"

"Shimomura took over after Hagi, the previous doctor, died in a traffic accident."

Dr. Hagi had apparently bolted into traffic and been killed while he was back on the mainland for a relative's memorial service. He'd run out into the middle of the road, blind drunk, and been hit by a long-haul truck.

However…

"It sounds as if someone was with him until right before it happened, but the details aren't clear. Strangely, the police weren't even able to identify where he'd been drinking on the night of the accident."

Could someone have kidnapped him, forced him to drink until he was intoxicated, then shoved him into traffic? A few members of the police force had suspected murder, but there had been no other clues to support the theory of foul play, so the investigation had been called off.

"The thing is, Shimomura has an alibi: He was confirmed to be here on the day of the accident, filling in for Hagi himself. If he hired someone else, though…" Shirou trailed off, the end of his sentence quivering faintly with doubt—and fear. "It may just be a ridiculous delusion, but first Hagi, then Kouji, and now Riko… Everyone on this island except for Shimomura has died. Say he killed Hagi first and wormed his way in as the live-in doctor here. Then he persuaded Riko to kill her own father while she was imprisoned. Finally, he killed Riko to keep her from talking and framed her father for her murder, then…"

And then there were none.

All he'd have to do now was provide a false alibi to Kazusa and Shirou, and to the police.

"I see. A perfect finish. However, there are a few points of concern."

Shiroshi suddenly turned to Seiji and whispered in his ear.

"First, the fact that you never saw Shimomura as a yokai."

"Huh? But that was because my eye was acting up—"

"Except it wasn't. Heh-heh-heh. I'll explain that in due time." He gave a smile that seemed full of meaning. "The most concerning fact is that the criminal used such an elaborate trick, yet completely disregarded the investigative abilities of the police."

"What do you mean?"

"They would have seen through every one of his tricks straight away. The anticoagulant in the blood at the crime scene, for example, would have been detected immediately. And no matter how he schemed to establish his alibi, the actual time of death will be obvious, since the severed head is here. That means this trick would only work until the police arrive."

"…Um, maybe he was planning to make himself scarce before they started investigating."

"That is a possibility, but the moment he went into hiding, he would practically be declaring himself guilty."

Good point, Seiji thought with a nod. But just then…

"Why didn't you say something sooner?! If we'd known about Shimomura earlier—"

"I just told you: It's groundless speculation! The police ruled Hagi's death an accident, so I was planning to collect a bit more information—but then you suddenly said you were coming to the island!"

At some point, the brothers' discussion had turned into a fight.

"Why didn't you fill me in, then?! You've had plenty of chances, even after we both arrived on the island!"

"Be serious! If you'd known, you obviously would have started causing a ruckus without a thought for the consequences! Worst-case scenario, you could have gotten yourself killed—"

"Who cares about that?!" Kazusa's tone had suddenly roughened. "If he'd killed me first, Riko might still be—"

“Enough!” The blood seemed to have gone to Shirou’s head as well. With a face like a vengeful demon’s, he hauled Kazusa up by his shirtfront, his voice crackling with fierce irritation. “You never think! Other people worry about you, and all you do is trample all over their concern! Why do you think I came all the way out here?! I did it to make sure *you* got back home alive! No matter how old you get, you never listen to what anyone says!”

It sounded just like Shirou’s usual criticisms and snide comments toward his brother.

But…

“…Wait, hang on. What did you just say? *Worry*? You?”

“Huh? That can’t be news to you! I’ve been worrying about you for ages; you’re the one who keeps ignoring it! No matter what advice I try to give you, all you do is complain! I warned you over and over again about your fashion brand as well, but you just—”

“Hold up. You ‘warned’ me? You mean all that time you spent criticizing and berating me?” Kazusa said with a groan.

Suddenly…

“Oh! Did you hear something just now?” Shiroshi asked.

Seiji strained his ears and picked up a peculiar noise.

What’s that?

A chill went down his spine.

Was it the whistling of the wind? No—it sounded more like the menacing hiss of a huge snake, and it was coming from the other side of the concrete wall.

Was it the hiss of steam?

“The boiler room!”

The color immediately drained from Shirou’s face as he dashed toward the back of the room.

A second later…

Huh?

Seiji spotted brand-new footprints in the thick layer of dust. They were just the right size for Shiroshi—or, no, for a slightly smaller woman or child.

And those footprints led toward…

“Dammit, the lock’s broken again! Who did this?!”

A metal door came into view at the end of the room. On first glance, it seemed to be part of the wall, but if you got right up

close, you could see the faint rectangular outline.

Shirou grabbed a rusted lever and pulled on it.

With the force of a blast of wind, it gave off a sudden hiss of escaping steam.

"…What's that?"

A raised walkway stretched away from the door, ending in a set of iron stairs that led down to a subbasement. Below, Seiji could see enormous metal cylinders approximately two meters across and four meters high. They looked as if they'd weigh several tons and were billowing with steam and rumbling so loudly that the space around them vibrated.

They were like raging iron bulls.

"Hey, isn't that kind of risky?! You can feel the heat all the way up here!"

"It's not just 'kind of risky,' you idiot!" Shirou snapped. "Back when this place was a hotel, these boilers almost exploded, and two employees were burned so badly, they died. It was caused by a corroded water supply line; that was thirty years ago, dammit! Starting those things up now would be—"

A roar of steam drowned out his voice.

The entire room was an enormous bomb with a lit fuse.

Shiroshi's eyes narrowed. He seemed impressed.

"I see; so that was it. As the coup de grâce, the culprit planned to obstruct the police investigation by blowing up the crime scene."

Was that *really* something a human would do?

"I'll activate the emergency shutdown! We might still make it in time," Shirou shouted.

"Huh?! You'll get burned just getting near those things! Do you even know how to do that?"

"Of course not! I have to handle them on sites sometimes, but this is the boiler technician's job! Still, I do know the emergency protocol. I'll just have to risk it."

Shirou stripped off his jacket and shoved it into Kazusa's arms.

"You just get upstairs!"

"Huh?! Don't give me that crap—!"

But Shirou grabbed his brother by the shirtfront and shoved him bodily through the door. Off-balance, Kazusa staggered out of the boiler room.

“At least listen to the last thing your older brother tells you, you fool!” Shirou yelled.

Then he closed the door—or at least, he tried to.

Kazusa had jammed the toe of his shoe into the gap.

“Like I’d ever listen to you, dumbass!”

Prying the door open with both hands, he kicked Shirou in the back, making him stagger farther down the walkway.

Having swallowed up both brothers, the door swung shut with a *bang*. The only ones left were Seiji and Shiroshi, completely excluded.

“…Well then, shall we flee aboveground? They seem to have forgotten us entirely.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

As they climbed the stairs to the surface, Shiroshi looked back at Seiji.

“I must say, though, I can’t simply let it go when someone’s played me for a fool to this extent. I may not look it, but when someone picks a fight with me, I make a point of taking them up on it.”

…Yes, I’m well aware of that.

“Now then, Seiji. Let’s finish this and go slay an *oni*.”

In contrast to his words, Shiroshi’s expression seemed rather lonely. Just as that thought went through his mind, Seiji realized he couldn’t hear the wind anymore.

The typhoon had ended.

*

This was, quite literally, the calm after the storm.

The ferocious rain and wind had died away as if they’d never been, and although rain clouds still covered the sky like thick cloth, small gaps had started to appear in places.

It was five in the morning. A red glow had appeared on the horizon half an hour earlier, and the next thing he knew, the sunrise had blazed across the entire sky. It was a lurid crimson, like blood fresh from a wound.

Well, that should make for a perfect ending, he thought, shrugging a little.

Dawn would come soon. The night when the *oni* feasted was ending.

And yet…

"That's weird. It should be just about time."

Tapping the toe of his shoe on the stone paving in irritation, he gazed down at Hotel Isola Bella.

He was on the highest level of the *Teatro Massimo*, the tiered Baroque garden.

Thirty meters above sea level, on a terrace that spread out like the stage of a theater, towered a statue of a unicorn—an allusion to the crest of the House of Borromeo.

The unicorn was thought to be a symbol of nobility and arrogance, and he'd heard it had once been considered an "incarnation of the devil" in the Old Testament. The beast really did suit this island.

Yeah, something's really not right.

The high-pressure boilers in the basement should have gone up in flames by now.

Even if the police did notice the fire, this was a small island fifteen kilometers offshore; launching a fireboat would be practically meaningless. The flames should have destroyed everything in the blink of an eye, including the mummy in the basement and the severed head and headless body.

Not that that matters much.

He only wanted two things: the deaths of Odoro Rindou and, most of all, Shiroshi Saijou.

But just then…

"Well, well. Planning to watch the fireworks from up here?"

At the sound of the voice, he flinched.

"I see. You've literally put yourself 'above it all.' They do say that fools and smoke climb to high places, but even so, your choice of location was rather simplistic—Aka."

It was Odoro Rindou.

He stood there, motionless, a shadow against the bloodred sky.

Aka gave a silent, frustrated growl, while he plastered a harmless, ingratiating smile on his face.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Detective. It seems you've got the wrong idea about something, though; I just came out to check on the garden, on Mr. Shimomura's orders—"

“Speaking of Shimomura, I apprehended him and rendered him unconscious only a moment ago. I thought it would be best to inform you first.”

“Um… What are you talking about?”

“The harbor was a clever idea. He’d hidden in a cavern in the shade of the rocks, along with a rubber lifeboat to use in his getaway, no doubt acting on your instructions. Since we had been previously informed that the sensors installed at the inlet would trigger an alarm if anyone suspicious approached, we weren’t as likely to search there.”

“Erm, I’m sorry. I really have no idea what all this is—”

“Enough of this charade. The truth of the matter is that I recognized you the moment I saw you. You’re a supernatural. Not only that, but you’re also a brother of that half-breed, Shiroshi Saijou. Isn’t that right?”

Well, this was a nuisance.

Odoro would eventually either kill or be killed by his older half brother. Since the Enma Ministry was keeping an eye on the situation, Aka didn’t think the man would harm him—but he really couldn’t afford to get careless.

“Aw, you found me out? That’s a surprise; I didn’t think we’d met before.”

“Yes, I assumed you wouldn’t remember. No doubt they made you forget.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Who can say? More importantly, it’s time we ended this. Dawn is approaching, and since the storm has abated, the killer may slip away right under our noses.”

“Oh, that’s right! You said you’d caught Shimomura. That’s a pity, I was looking for him, actually; Shiroshi told me to. I never thought you’d beat me to him. Well, either way, I guess the case is closed!”

“Yes, it is. Or rather, I am about to close it.”

The next thing he knew, the tip of Odoro’s walking stick was pointed right at his face.

“You were the true perpetrator in this incident. Isn’t that right, Aka?”

The detective smiled. Mockingly, ferociously, arrogantly.

Oh, yes, he knew. If the proudest, most beautiful creature in the world was the unicorn—then that was exactly what this man was.

"Seriously, what are you talking about? You just said you'd caught Shimomura."

"Yes, as your accomplice. I suppose one could call him an assistant. However, the only sinner in this incident was you. According to the Mirror of Illumination, at any rate."

No way… Does he know?

"I realized as much because of the half-breed's pet mongrel."

Dammit, so it really was Seiji Tohno.

"I was leaked a valuable tidbit from the Enma Ministry, on the grounds of 'ensuring that all information was shared fairly.' Apparently, that joke of an assistant has a fragment of the Mirror of Illumination in his left eye that allows him to see those who have committed sins as yokai."

Aka clicked his tongue softly.

That Enma Ministry rat. He had no business doing that.

"A little while ago, I happened to encounter him when his master wasn't around. When I threatened him a little, he told me everything quite easily. With the exception of Miss Riko, who had disguised herself as Kouji, he said not one of the other six people there had manifested as a yokai—which struck me as very strange indeed."

As he spoke, Odoro closed the distance between himself and Aka, the tip of his cane clacking loudly against the paving.

"That would mean that Miss Riko's murderer wasn't among us—yet that was impossible. The trick was quite obvious once I studied the crime scene, and Shimomura was the only one who'd had the opportunity to pull it off."

Finally, the sound of his leather shoes stopped.

Right in front of Aka.

"At that point, a theory occurred to me: While Shimomura had to be the one to establish his alibi when the crime scene was discovered, everything else—killing Miss Riko, beheading her, and using the false torso to make it seem as if she were still alive—could have been done by another. That individual was the true criminal in this affair. And, if they were a supernatural, I thought the Mirror of Illumination might not have considered it a crime."

He was right.

Just as humans ate animals, *oni* ate humans. That was the natural order of the world.

No matter how many crops humans harvested or livestock they butchered, the Mirror of Illumination wouldn't count it as a sin. In the same way, if killing and eating humans—and sometimes even ruthlessly slaying their own parents or siblings—was the nature of supernaturals, the head of a single human woman couldn't possibly be of any consequence.

Not to mention…

Odoro, the man right in front of him, was a heinous criminal who'd killed his twelve brothers. That stupid mutt should have caught on long ago from the fact that Odoro had *never once* looked like a yokai.

"Last night, the half-breed and I were ordered to wait in our rooms until midnight. That meant no one but you could have been the killer."

Shut up, Aka almost said, but he bit his lower lip to stop himself.

If he snapped at the other man now, he'd be playing right into his hands.

"Now then, as to why your accomplice Shimomura never appeared as a yokai. In all likelihood, he was the equivalent of an assistant who'd been spontaneously picked out of the audience and called up onstage for a magic trick. He helped you at every turn, but he had no way of knowing the entire plan or the mechanisms and tricks on which it turned. He may not even have been informed that Miss Riko would die."

Odoro held up four fingers and began ticking them off one by one.

"It's likely that you gave Shimomura four instructions. The first was that he was to visit Miss Riko's room when we entered the eye of the typhoon at one in the morning, taking one or more of the five guests with him. The second was to open the latch on the shutters while pretending to check that it was secured. The third was to refasten the brooch at Miss Riko's throat in such a way that it punctured the vinyl beneath it. The fourth was to take her empty clothes from the wheelchair and out of the room, and

to put them somewhere safe. Yes, even taken altogether, one would be hard-pressed to see a genuine crime in that."

"Wait a second, that can't be right. Didn't you see how Shimomura reacted? He cried, he was shocked, he threw up. You can't act unless you've got a script to work from, you know? How could someone react so naturally if they didn't know what they were—?"

"Oh, that man could."

Aka felt his skin break out in goose bumps.

It felt weird, as if an unseen hand was choking him.

"His facial expressions are what gave it away. When Shimomura was dealing with Kazusa, both in the dining room and in the parlor, he imitated Shirou's expressions, and with the dumb mutt, he imitated his master. If you wish to make someone you've just met trust you, or conversely, to threaten someone who's hostile to you, you copy the mannerisms of one of their social superiors."

Odoro shrugged, the look on his face somewhere between admiration and disgust.

"As techniques for navigating life go, it's rather pathological. For a man like that, it would be as natural as breathing to analyze the situation and expressions of the person he was dealing with, then adjust his behavior to give off the intended impression."

"He got me," Aka muttered to himself.

Frankly, he'd underestimated Odoro Rindou. He'd considered him no more than a good-looking foil to Shiroshi, and yet…

Even now, Aka kept up his front, and he gave a casual shrug.

"Huh. That was a really nice, long explanation, but in the end, it's all just a theory. I get that Shimomura's a weirdo. But you don't have a shred of evidence that I'm the one who—"

"I do, actually. Right here."

Odoro took out a familiar smartphone.

It was Shimomura's.

"I borrowed it when I rendered him unconscious. The half-breed's mutt also told me that at half past three, immediately after that will was sent to Shimomura from Kouji's phone, you said, 'It was sent at half past one, exactly when we heard the noise from the second floor.' "

"…He must've misheard me."

“Feign ignorance all you like. Unfortunately for you, there were multiple witnesses. Now look at this, if you would.”

The LCD screen showed the message containing the will.

However, the time stamp was three thirty AM.

“No doubt you thought, ‘That’s ridiculous. I know I sent it at half past one.’ Ordinarily, when there is a significant lag between when a message is sent and received, the time stamp shows the time at which it was sent. However, just then, an irregular situation was unfolding.” Odoro spoke like an adult who was carefully explaining something to a child. “The power outage. When a message is sent from a cellular phone, it travels through multiple servers and is saved in the recipient’s in-box. The base station had lost power at the time, though, resulting in the message not sending properly.”

He’s got me.

Back then, Kazusa had snatched the phone from him so fast that he hadn’t been able to check what time the message had been sent. Who’d have thought that would trip him up like this?

“In other words, the only person who knew this text had been sent at half past one was the murderer. At that time, if you’ll recall, you were slacking on the job and playing games on your smartphone. However, what you were actually doing was listening to the situation on the second floor, waiting for the right moment to send that text. When you heard the noise above us, you hit ‘Send’ on Kouji’s smartphone—which you’d stolen when you killed Miss Riko.”

And then…

He was mocking him, looking down on him, baring his true nature that lay beneath the alabaster mask.

“Do you have any objections?”

Confusion, anger, irritation… Aka bit his lip, resisting all the emotions welling up inside him. A single word went through his mind: *Run*. He had to catch this man off guard somehow and make his escape—but just as he thought that…

“Heh.” Odoro let out a chuckle from deep in his throat.

One would have thought he’d heard an entertaining joke; his expression was completely out of place— He looked like he’d gone mad. An obstinate laugh escaped him, and his shoulders trembled.

“Ah, I beg your pardon. You seem to have misunderstood.”

He extended a palm to Aka, as if inviting him to shake his hand.

“All along, your goal was the assassination of that young half-breed, Shiroshi Saijou. Am I wrong? If the heir meets an accidental death in an explosion, you will be the sole beneficiary. And if you could make sure that your enemy—namely myself—died along with him, you would have bagged two birds with one stone.” Odoro’s voice was rich and mellow.

He sounded in such high spirits that it seemed as if he might start humming at any moment.

“And in the unlikely event that you failed, you had Shimomura as insurance. ‘If there is any error in the judgment, the full punishment will be transferred to the arbiter.’ That is the rule laid down by the Enma Ministry. If you could make the half-breed believe that Shimomura was the murderer, he would deal a fatal blow to himself when he handed down his judgment at the very end.”

Yes, that had been what he was after.

The boy was half-human, half-yokai—a failure from birth. Yet he shamelessly spoke of himself as the heir. Aka’s true goal had been to hurl that disgrace into the depths of Hell.

And then…

“Really—that’s not bad.”

“Huh?”

“As it happens, I’ve been looking for a collaborator who could assist me in putting an end to that detestable half-breed. The Enma Ministry’s arrangement prohibits us from harming one another; however, that would not apply to a member of Sanmoto Gorouzaemon’s faction—and particularly not to a sibling such as yourself. Internal conflict over the succession is not in the Ministry’s purview.”

Odoro smiled at him. At Aka, and at no one else.

“That means our interests are aligned. And besides, you, who are from an ancient and honorable supernatural bloodline, are far more suited to be my rival than he is. What do you say? Not a bad deal, is it?”

Aka shook Odoro’s hand, as if he’d been drawn in by the man.

A moment later, the tip of the walking stick came up, and—

“Huh?”

A sharp gunshot rang out.

Aka crumpled to his knees before his brain had even registered the fact that he’d been shot, and a powerful kick slammed directly into his wound.

“Gah, aaah!”

A turbid howl burst from his throat. Aka had toppled onto his back, and a second later, the handle of the cane came down on his right knee, shattering it easily. Straightening up again, Odoro pinched the brim of his hat and casually resettled it on his head.

“Did you really think that an adult wouldn’t get angry if, in the middle of a serious game of chess, an ill-mannered child messed up the board?”

His lips curled up into a ferocious, sardonic smile, baring his canines like an animal.

“Wh-why…?” Aka groaned, and a sharp, metallic taste spread over the back of his tongue. He choked, spitting up bright blood.

The detective gave him a cold glance. “Since you seem to be operating under a misunderstanding, let me make one thing clear.”

Smoke was still rising from the muzzle of the walking stick in his hand. It was an antique gun cane, the type with a barrel that ran down its entire shaft.

Odoro removed the handle of the cane to load another bullet, then knelt beside Aka.

“*He* is my enemy, and my prey.” Grabbing the boy’s head roughly by the hair, he peered into his upturned face. “I said I would kill him. I swore to end him with my own two hands. So if anyone tries to get in my way, I will eliminate them first. Just like I’ll do to you.”

There was an indifference in his gaze, as if he were looking down at a squashed fly.

A greasy sweat broke out on Aka’s forehead, and he glared back at the man, his eyes seething bloodred.

“Odoro Rindou, have you lost your mind?! I also belong to Sanmoto Gorouzaemon’s line. According to the Enma Ministry, your loss was decided the second you shed my blood—”

“…Well, well. Listen to you prattle on.”

Aka’s scream was drowned out by a second gunshot.

Having fired another .32 caliber bullet into the boy, Odoro wasted no time reloading, his face contorted into a mask of sadism.

“Now then, it’s time I explained the trick to you,” Odoro said, sounding as if he were enjoying himself. “Why does it not matter if I torment you to death? That’s because—” But just as he was getting started, another voice spoke.

“Rindou.”

He looked up sharply. A new figure had stepped out onto the highest level of the stagelike terrace. He wore a white kimono that looked like a burial robe, yet the early morning light had dyed it as red as blood.

The newcomer stood in front of them, looking for all the world like the star of the show.

“You’ve played your role well. Trade with me now, if you would.”

It was Shiroshi Saijou.

*

When Seiji followed Shiroshi out onto the terrace, for some reason the visual of Odoro being trampled by the *nue* rose in his mind.

Why is that?

Had the choking smell of blood triggered the memory? No— It was the smile on Shiroshi’s face. The one he had whenever he was plotting something.

“Wait, no… Were you in on this together? Did you set me up?” Aka’s voice croaked, but he barely managed to finish before he coughed violently and spat up blood.

Odoro shot him a disgusted glance, then spoke to Shiroshi.

“You don’t have to tell me; I’ll leave this to you. I have one final task to perform.” And with that, Odoro exited the terrace.

“As it happens, Odoro and I have become what’s commonly known as ‘texting buddies,’ ” Shiroshi calmly explained. “Though I only learned his address by peeking at Takamura’s phone.”

Oh, right. It must’ve been back then, thought Seiji.

When Takamura had appeared in their guest room in the annex, he’d taken photos of the written request they’d received

and forwarded the pictures to Odoro. While Seiji had been admiring the man's high-speed flick input, Shiroshi must have sneaked a look at the screen and instantly memorized the recipient's address.

Of course…

That explained why he'd borrowed Seiji's phone in the parlor: to text Odoro.

"Just this once, our interests had aligned, so I imposed on him for a little while. In exchange, however, I was compelled to reveal the secret of Seiji's left eye. He was startled, as one would imagine; he couldn't believe Seiji had started out as a genuine assistant."

That's what startled him?! Seiji screamed internally.

Shiroshi didn't spare him so much as a glance. He just gazed steadily at Aka.

"Naturally, after being nearly killed in an explosion, I couldn't simply ignore you any longer. That is why I had Odoro catch you. You would almost certainly have gotten away from me."

"When…? When did you realize it was me?"

"From the very beginning. Or, more accurately, before I came to this island, when the 'written request' from Riko arrived. It was you who addressed that envelope, wasn't it? The peculiarities of the handwriting matched the letter of challenge you'd given to Seiji the week before."

"There's no way! I disguised my handwriting perfectly!"

"Yes, you did. The handwriting on the address matched that of the letter. However, it wasn't the penmanship that caught my attention, but the order in which you wrote the strokes."

Shiroshi took two letters out of the breast of his kimono: the letter from Riko and the letter of challenge to Seiji.

"See here?" he said, pointing out the phrase "an auspicious day in July" in Seiji's letter and the words "Kiou Island" on the address on the envelope. The character for "auspicious" was also the "Ki" in "Kiou": 吉.

"Stroke order is an unconscious habit, so no matter how you imitate another person's handwriting, despite your best efforts, your own quirks tend to come through. Particularly with fountain pens, the pressure of the pen against the paper naturally

makes lines darker or lighter in places, so it's easy to grasp the flow of the strokes even with the naked eye."

According to Shiroshi's explanation, the cross at the top of the character was known as the "samurai radical." When written properly, the long horizontal stroke was drawn first, followed by the vertical stroke, and finally the short horizontal stroke. In both the letter of challenge and on the envelope, however, it had been written with the long horizontal stroke first, the short horizontal stroke second, and the vertical stroke last.

Stroke 1 → Stroke 3 → Stroke 2.

"I'm told that less than ten percent of Japan's population is in the habit of writing it that way. As evidence goes, that's a fairly persuasive number. And there's one more thing."

Shiroshi pointed to the words "Nagasaki Prefecture" in the address. Taking a closer look at it, "prefecture" had been written using an outdated version of the character.

"It's the old form that was used before common-use characters were standardized. Meaning the individual who wrote this letter was educated either before or around the time the new character forms were simplified. That would make them over ninety if they were human. Or they could be a supernatural close to my age—like you, for example."

"Dammit, none of that is actual proof!"

"I thought you would say that, so I had the handwriting analyzed and was informed that both had been written by the same person. It's been certified by an expert."

That said, Seiji suspected he'd sent them in because he was hoping, deep down, that he might be wrong.

Shiroshi had also wanted to avoid this ending.

"As an aside, the enclosed letter was written by someone else. The only thing you falsified was the envelope. It's likely you opened the original letter and sent it using a new envelope."

"…Yeah, that's right. It was sent to Kazusa, that wannabe designer."

So it hadn't been a "written request" but an invitation meant for Kazusa?

In the end, the letter had never reached him.

Even so, Kazusa had come to the island anyway. He'd even been here on the specified day, August 19. The two cousins might

have shared some sort of special connection.

“Now then, you needn’t worry; I can’t kill you. Neither can anybody else.”

Shiroshi took a step forward. He quietly closed his eyes, then opened them again.

“After all, you’re already dead, Hibana—my elder brother.”

It might have been seconds, or an instant.

A silence that seemed eternal dominated the terrace. Even the ceaseless sound of the waves seemed to have fallen still.

“It’s time I showed you as well.”

Shiroshi held out a photograph. Its faded sepia surface was spotted with age, but the figure in the photo had kept its color.

Even the crimson of the peony that bloomed on his newsboy cap.

It was Aka.

He stood right in the center of the photo, holding a swaddled baby. Although he held it rather gingerly, he was desperately trying to make it look like it was no big deal. It was adorable.

Come to think of it…

Two weeks ago, when Shiroshi had asked the “appropriate party” about Aka, he’d received a photograph in response. Could this be it?

“What is this? When was this photo taken? I don’t remember this—”

“It’s a very old photograph. After all, I’d only just been born. The infant you’re holding is me.”

No, that can’t be right.

Shiroshi was a newborn in the photo, yet Aka looked no different than he did now.

“What I’m trying to tell you is that you’re not my *younger* brother but my *older* brother.”

Seiji couldn’t seem to process what Shiroshi was saying.

“I once had thirty-one brothers. However, a few days after that photo was taken, they were all killed by our father, Sanmoto Gorouzaemon. I was his youngest son and only half-yokai, yet he did it to make me his heir.”

Then had the “appropriate party” Shiroshi had been referring to been his father, the Demon King?

“Don’t lie! I’ve never seen that baby! And anyway, if I died, how am I—?”

But before he could say the word *alive*, Aka began to cough violently.

Out of nowhere…

“Are you familiar with a picture scroll known as the *Haseo-zoushi*?

Shiroshi shifted the conversation in a completely different direction.

“It’s set in the Heian period. In the tale, a scholar named Kino Haseo plays a game of *sugoroku* with an *oni* who lives in the Suzaku gate. Haseo wins, and although he’s given a woman of peerless beauty as his prize, he does what the *oni* tells him not to do, and she turns to water and disappears. The woman was actually an artificial human the *oni* had made by collecting the bones of the dead. Additionally, in the *Senjusho*, a text from roughly a century earlier, we find the ‘man of bones made on the pilgrimage to Mount Kouya’ who is made by *oni* ‘gathering human bones to make of them a human.’ ”

In other words, had making living people from corpses once been considered a secret *oni* skill?

“What brought you back into this world was the Art of Soul’s Recall, which restores the dead from bones… Although your memories seem to have been conveniently altered.”

“No…,” murmured Aka, understandably dumbfounded.

Shiroshi continued.

“There is a certain condition imposed on this art.”

He gazed steadily at Aka, as if the boy would vanish the moment he blinked.

“One must not say the name of the dead. ‘If brought to light, both creator and creation will dissolve into nothing.’ That is to say, they turn to water and disappear.”

Yes, just like that.

The moment Shiroshi said those words, Aka’s eyes widened with fear. He looked down and saw that his hands were turning transparent, starting from the fingertips, as if he were becoming a sculpture made of water.

“ ‘The woman turned to water and was lost.’ The ending alone is the same as in the *Haseo-zoushi*.”

Shiroshi's voice was terribly quiet, with not a trace of inflection.

Immediately after—

"I—I remember! I remember!" Aka howled, shaking his head, his hair disheveled.

He got to his feet, baring the nearly bloodred whites of his eyes, as dark blood spilled from his stomach.

"It was you! It was all your fault! If you'd died, none of us would've had to! Because of *you*, everybody—!"

There was something even more menacing than bloodlust in his eyes. Seiji instinctively reached for Shiroshi's arm, intending to pull him back—but he was too late.

Aka's nails gouged the flesh of Shiroshi's cheek, and blood sprayed into the air.

But…that was all.

The next moment, Aka's body lost its shape and collapsed with a splash. It looked like someone had crushed a pillar of water with their hand, and it disappeared almost immediately, carried off by the wind.

His face, his hands, his fingers.

His flesh, his bones, his blood.

The only thing left behind was an artificial crimson peony.

That was all.

"You could have used those nails of yours to slash my throat, there at the end," Shiroshi said.

The red petals rustled softly as he scooped them up in his hands. He held them the way one might hold the last uncremated fragments of the bones of the deceased.

His voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

Somewhere in its depths it trembled, but it was faint, ever so faint.

"…But you couldn't do it, could you?"

Brother Hibana, he said, so softly, he might not really have said it at all.

It almost sounded as if he were crying.

The house they'd grown up in stood on the shore of a big lake in the north of Wales.

At first, their parents simply hadn't shown any interest in them. There hadn't seemed to be anything wrong with their marriage, but eventually their father stopped coming home, and their mother began buying any strong liquor she could get her hands on. With each passing day, she became more of a bad-tempered tyrant, as if she were collecting all the unhappiness in the world.

They couldn't remember what had happened in the several years that followed; they'd forgotten all about that time when their mother had died. Yet even when it was just the two of them living alone in that house on the lakeshore, they felt more dead than alive.

Their nails had been ripped away, broken bones had been left unset, and their hands and feet were a patchwork of bruises. The tip of the older brother's little finger had been bitten off, and the younger brother's trousers were caked with dog semen.

There was one real corpse there as well. It belonged to the one they'd once called a monster—but at this point, she was just a beautiful woman.

Submerged in the bathtub, her body never decayed. Instead, her moonlight-pale skin gradually acquired a luster that made it look as if it had been painted with a thin coat of wax. As time passed, she transformed from a human into a doll. Her body had become corpse wax.

It was only then that they finally felt like they could love their mother.

The two brothers would hold hands and give her a good-night kiss where she slept in the bath. They'd always felt blissfully happy in that brief moment of time.

Had it been the older brother who'd killed their mother, or the younger? One of them had grabbed her head while she'd been dozing in the bath and pushed it under the tepid water.

Little things like that didn't matter. After all, at long last, they'd managed to love her.

When they looked back, those six months may have been the happiest time of their lives.

Eventually, after an uproar that had dragged in the whole town, the two of them were sent to an orphanage. It didn't take long for their uncle and aunt—their only blood relations—to adopt *him* because of his smile. It was a kind smile, the sort you'd give to someone who was crying, but thinking back on it now, he'd only been imitating his mother's corpse in the bathtub.

And just like that, "they" became "him." His foster father and mother, who were impeccably Japanese, renamed him Junichirou Shimomura after his great-grandfather.

He was supposed to love his adoptive parents, and so he did.

He was supposed to get outstanding grades in school and aspire to become a psychiatrist to succeed his foster father, and so he did.

When his former teacher introduced him to his daughter, he was expected to marry her, and so he did.

On the day his wife learned she was pregnant, she left him a note saying, *You don't have a human heart*, and she hung herself.

He was supposed to grieve more than anyone, and so he did.

In the end, "he" was "him." He hadn't managed to become "Junichirou Shimomura."

He began to wonder if he would be able to die soon, but no one would let him, and so he didn't.

And then he met her.

A girl named Riko Ayatsuji— Or rather, the doll made in her image.

It had happened when Hagi, an acquaintance of his from university, had asked him to go to Kiou Island in far west Kyushu.

The first thing that had come to mind was his mother lying beneath the water of the bathtub. All those nights he'd held his brother's hand and kissed her on the forehead.

The moonlight streaming in through the skylight, the warmth of their joined hands, the coolness of her forehead when he kissed it. *She* encompassed all of that. The smile on her lips was just like the one his mother had had once she'd turned into a doll.

For the first time, he shed tears over the fact that “he” was no longer “they.”

All the things he’d never been able to have—sadness, anger, hatred, loneliness—he found in her.

So when he heard of a young man who ran a consultation service, he confided in him.

He said that all he wanted was to be with her forever.

And then Hagi had died.

His dream ended abruptly.

When he opened his eyes, his head felt cloudy and sluggish, empty except for a headache and a dizzy feeling. Apparently, someone had knocked him out in the inlet cave, and he’d only just regained consciousness.

The sky was noisy.

A flock of calling seabirds wheeled through the air, as if celebrating the end of the storm. Their strangely shrill cries were unpleasant, like fingernails digging into his inner ear.

“You’re awake, are you?”

He turned toward the voice to find a young man leaning against the wet rock wall, his arms crossed.

It was Odoro Rindou.

The man got up and walked away from the wall, his walking stick clicking sharply against the stone. The hard noise sounded like the rap of a judge’s gavel.

“Now then, it’s time. Unlike another individual I could name, I don’t have a penchant for letting sinners slip through my fingers.”

Shimomura didn’t understand what he was saying.

But the young man didn’t seem to care.

“If an *oni* is one who was born human and ceases to be human while alive, then yes, that certainly makes you an *oni*. However, unfortunately, that means you are blameless. As Shuten-douji said during his final moments, ‘Demons don’t resort to lies or deceit.’ Evil impulses are born only in human hearts.”

As he spoke, Odoro slowly raised his hand and pinched the brim of his hat.

“Therefore, I will entrust your judgment to human hands.”

His thin lips arched into a mocking smile.

Allow me to make an announcement:

On the nineteenth of August, a dismemberment will occur at Hotel Isola Bella. I promise you this single night will spell the end of this Hell more beautiful than Heaven. I invite you to witness it.

The words he smoothly recited from memory sounded like a poem… Or perhaps a passage from a letter.

“That was a letter written by Miss Riko. The damned brat who received it jumped to the conclusion that she was requesting his services, but in fact, it was intended as a notice.”

How strange.

The wingbeats of the seabirds sounded like the bustling noise of an audience waiting impatiently for the start of a performance.

“I believe Miss Riko had decided to bid you farewell on her twentieth birthday. She wrote this letter to the person for whom she held the deepest affection. She predicted that it would bring death to Hotel Isola Bella, and to herself, but she wrote it anyway. What revenge was she willing to go so far to carry out? The text of the letter makes that quite clear… And so I have executed it on her behalf.”

As Odoro spoke, his face was like the mask of a vengeful demon Shimomura had seen once in a Noh play.

Hatred, obsession, resentment, and unfathomable malice. It was an evil smile that only someone with a human heart should have been able to make, which made it seem as if Odoro had been possessed by the vengeful ghost of a young girl.

“The tale ‘How a woman was taken and devoured by a wicked *oni*’ from the *Nihon Ryouiki* is a prime example of how, ever since the distant Heian period, women have been the ones who were fated to be consumed by *oni*. However, women harbor *oni* inside them as well. They are devoured by *oni*, yet they also become *oni* and devour others. That makes this an entirely natural ending.”

Unable to stop himself, Shimomura broke into a run. He’d planned to use a rubber raft hidden in the cave to rendezvous with the ship that would come to pick him up offshore. In that raft, under layer upon layer of waterproof tarps, was a box-

shaped storage trunk. With trembling fingers, he undid the latch and opened the lid.

And there—he saw it.

The last thing he wanted to see.

It was *her*, demolished by Odoro's hands. Her face had been smashed, her joints torn apart, her skin ripped off. It was as if she'd been chewed to pieces by wolves or wild dogs.

Allow me to make an announcement:

On the nineteenth of August, a dismemberment will occur at Hotel Isola Bella.

Oh, I see. She's dismembered.

He knew something inside of him had broken as soon as he whispered those words in his heart.

He could hear the wingbeats of the seabirds, like thunderous applause, rising from the audience.

Were their raucous cries of rage, or of resentment? Or were they cheers? Or perhaps they were the screams of a creature in its death throes.

Finally, Odoro murmured a line from a children's song.

"Truly, truly, 'tis a pity."

And so the performance of the *oni*'s feast came to a close.

Dawn had broken.

*

He thought she was always gazing at the ocean.

That she kept her eyes fixed on somewhere that wasn't here.

Just like him, who had nowhere to run.

August 19.

Every year, for a few days around this date, his grandfather Kenjirou and the rest of the family would gather at Hotel Isola Bella.

The official reason had been to celebrate his cousin Riko's birthday, but even if Riko had a mountain of presents piled up around her, she just ignored them as if they bored her.

The summer he realized she was looking out at the ocean, Kazusa had been eleven, and Riko nine.

It wasn't just when she was relaxing by the window alone, or when the adults were complimenting her on her appearance; every time he looked, she was gazing out to sea.

So of course that's what she'd been doing then as well.

"I swear, that boy's such a failure. Who knows who he took after…?"

"It seems they already ran a DNA test, but rumor has it she had other men."

"They say life got to be too much, and she killed herself, but you just know she did it to get back at the next guy to dump her."

He'd crept into the annex to get away from the nasty gossip the adults were spreading.

When he crossed the skyway and ran into the room at the very back on the left, he was surprised to find someone else already there.

Riko.

Even with the sound of the door opening, she didn't even glance at Kazusa. Riko just kept glaring out at the square patch of sea in the window, her eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Even on the distant horizon, there was no sign of land. He didn't see any fishing boats, either, just a lonely blue expanse of water as far as the eye could see.

Something in it reminded him of the girl's profile.

"Look, if you're just going to stand there, why don't you say something?"

She gave Kazusa a cold glare, and he felt flustered. When Riko had turned to look at him, he'd noticed that her eyes were tinged with red, as if she'd been crying silently about something until just now.

"I, um… I was just thinking you watch the ocean a lot," he blurted out before realizing.

People said that his uncle had once been a famous dollmaker, and it was clear even to outsiders that he was trying to polish his only daughter, Riko, into one of his works of art. Uncle hated it when she showed any emotion whatsoever. Lately, he'd even started to give an irritated growl if she so much as laughed at a joke.

For as long as she was on this island, she was a doll in a glass case.

“So I thought maybe you wanted to run away.”

He’d being going to add, *I do, too*, but his voice had given out on him.

Kazusa was a doll as well.

On top of that, he was an inferior article: They were trying to make him like Shirou, his older half brother, but Kazusa couldn’t have been more different.

Ever since he was small, he’d had cram school and private lessons practically every day. He’d tried to live the way the adults around him wanted him to, and he just couldn’t do it.

Once he realized he was a failure, he’d stayed quiet, hoping to at least avoid offending anybody. However, while he’d been passively going through the motions, it had gotten harder and harder for him to breathe. It was as if the air was crushing him. Kazusa constantly felt as if he was running out of oxygen, and no matter how many breaths he took, it never seemed to be enough.

He just wanted to escape to some distant place. Somewhere far, far away, where nobody could reach him: not his nagging older brother who scolded him, nor the adults who looked at him with scorn and contempt.

Before his heart or his body actually died.

Then, out of nowhere, he heard something rip.

Riko had stripped off the gauze covering the little finger of her left hand. There was a swollen, blistered red patch near its base, as if she’d been burned.

She slowly lifted her hand up to her face, then bit down hard, right on the burn.

“Ow!”

“Um, excuse me? That didn’t hurt *you*, dummy!” Riko shouted at him.

Her eyes were misty with tears, and she turned away, rubbing them roughly on her shoulder, as if to hide the fact that she was crying.

“I burned it with a lighter earlier. As long as I’ve got this scar, I’m me—not some doll. I just felt like if I didn’t make it obvious, I’d stop being able to tell someday.”

Her eyes stayed fixed on the horizon as she spoke, in the direction the waves came from. The sea wind toyed with her hair, and she pushed a lock behind her ear as if it was annoying her.

“Also, I’m not running away; I’m *leaving*. I’ll go where I want to go.”

Live where I want to live, is how it sounded to Kazusa.

When Riko had said that, her eyes had been so straightforward, so resolute, that it made him worry a bit.

That was when it dawned on him.

Kazusa had thought Riko was always looking at the ocean—but she’d actually had her eyes fixed on what lay beyond. On the outside world.

Oh. Is it really that simple?

Can I just go where I want to live?

Suddenly, all the pieces seemed to fall into place. It felt as if he’d managed to cut the marionette strings that had bound him hand and foot.

Oh, I see.

That sure isn’t here, then.

If I can go somewhere like that one day, I don’t want to live as who I am now.

So that’s why…

I’ll change, Kazusa thought, for what might have been the first time in his life.

Just then…

Light streamed down through a break in the clouds, illuminating Hotel Isola Bella.

Kazusa was so captivated by everything he saw that he forgot to blink.

There was something almost melancholy about it, like the most beautiful moment of a person’s life remembered just before death. He had the feeling he’d remember this sight forever, up until his very last breath.

This place really was more beautiful than Heaven.

“Sorry, just give me a minute,” Kazusa said. His voice was trembling. He closed his eyes and covered them with both hands, as if what he’d seen had been too dazzling for him to look at.

Riko might have realized he was crying silently, but she didn’t say anything. She just stayed there with him.

He felt as if Riko had been with him ever since.

On that day, in that place, Kazusa was finally transformed from a doll into a human.

He wasn't an imitation. He wasn't an accessory. He was just a human, Kazusa Ayatsuji.

Riko became Kazusa's heart.

Even now, she was keeping him alive.

*

And so…

The boilers were kept from exploding, thanks to the efforts of the Ayatsuji brothers, and all they had to do after that was wait for the police to arrive. Technically, Seiji and Shiroshi should have stayed and let themselves be interviewed as well, but it seemed the Enma Ministry would take care of that, so they headed back a little early in a rental boat piloted by Takamura. There was a good chance the Men in Black of urban legend might actually be Enma Ministry bureaucrats.

At present, Seiji and Shiroshi found themselves on the street that led back to the house.

Black wooden fences stretched away endlessly on both sides of the road, while the wide, clear sky overhead seemed the polar opposite of yesterday's storm. The shrill, noisy chorus of cicadas made it seem as though summer might last forever, yet the dead ones scattered around the place suggested that autumn could be closer than it seemed.

Then…

"Let me tell you an old story," Shiroshi began, when they were a little over halfway to the house. "It's about my mother."

Shiroshi said that his mother had been an orphan of war who'd gone on to train as a geisha. When she was sixteen, just after she'd graduated from apprentice to full geisha, a widowed medicine wholesaler arranged to purchase her freedom and take her as his second wife.

With the wedding just around the corner, however, a "headhunter" who'd terrified prostitutes in the days right after

the war abducted her and held her prisoner in his hideout.

"Only, the criminal was the one who was gradually cornered, and he ultimately went mad. He cut off his ears, gouged out his cheeks, dug out one eye—then shoved them all into his mouth and died of suffocation."

When the police raided the site of the horrific suicide, they found a note.

Hell isn't only in the next world.
This woman is a demon of Hell who passes judgment on sinners.

"Um, so in a lot of ways, she was just like you?"

"It does seem that way."

…Well, at least he's aware. That's good.

One would have thought the story ended happily ever after—but society wasn't having any of that.

The woman's insane. No, she's a demon.

Awful rumors started to spread that she "asked the killer for human flesh," and "entertained herself every night by playing dolls with the severed heads he brought home," until eventually Shiroshi's mother was confined to an isolated room in her husband's house.

It was then that Sanmoto Gorouzaemon stopped by to get a look at the rumored demoness.

This girl— Is she a god or a demon?
Either way, she's the most dreadfully beautiful woman alive.

He'd courted her relentlessly for five years, after which time she became pregnant with Shiroshi.

However…

"Although the official records call it a suicide, she died giving birth to me. In her final moments, she told my father to install the child she'd born to him as his heir, no matter the sacrifices he had to make."

And so, Sanmoto Gorouzaemon had become a heinous monster who'd killed thirty-one of his own children.

"In short, I was born to a madwoman who was feared as a demon and a grievous sinner who killed his sons."

For as far back as he could remember, he'd been surrounded by enemies.

After all, each of his thirty-one siblings had had spouses they'd shared vows with or close friends they'd taken as sworn brothers.

To every one of those survivors, young Shiroshi was their mortal enemy, the target of their revenge.

"My father chose to hide me. He's always kept me and my attendant Beniko isolated in places shielded by spells to turn people away, as that house is."

Then, just five years ago, this contest to send sinners to Hell had come up, and Shiroshi had suddenly been dragged into the public eye.

"That's… Honestly, I'd want to just ditch the whole thing."

"Heh-heh-heh. I must confess I did think that none of this was my problem. However, the truth is that securing the position of Demon King is the only way for me to win my freedom."

He's tough, Seiji thought, watching Shiroshi's smiling profile.

He looked stronger, and lonelier, than anyone else.

"The man who resurrected Hibana, my youngest brother, was one of my father's closest advisers. He'd been the secret lover of my oldest brother and had been watching for a chance to avenge his death."

It turned out that the "appropriate party" Shiroshi had contacted after Aka appeared really had been his father. After that, Beniko and Shiroshi had split up: Beniko had gone with Sanmoto Gorouzaemon to smoke out the person who'd opened Hibana's grave and cast the spell to resurrect him, while Shiroshi had accepted the enemy's invitation as a diversion to draw their attention.

That meant Seiji had unwittingly accompanied Shiroshi as a decoy.

"As my father was torturing him, the man turned to water and disappeared. I would imagine this happened the moment Hibana dissolved."

Both creator and creation will dissolve into nothing.

It had happened exactly the way the story from the Heian period had said it would.

"This case really is over, then."

“Yes, most likely. However, there is one thing that still concerns me.” Shiroshi tilted his head to one side. “It sounds as if the man was not acquainted with Shimomura.”

“……Huh?”

Seiji couldn’t help a look of utter shock from crossing his face.

“Wha—? No, that can’t be right! If that’s true, none of this would’ve even happened in the first place, right?”

“Yes, which means there was another mastermind. It’s likely that they were the one who killed Hagi in Shimomura’s place, persuaded Riko to kill her father, and then sent in ‘Aka’ to set this whole affair in motion.”

A feeling of dread crept down Seiji’s spine like a swarm of centipedes.

Long ago, *oni* had been “hidden ones,” beings that were never seen.

In that case, this mastermind was a true *oni*.

And then…

“Do you remember Serina Suzuki?” Shiroshi asked.

The name did ring a bell. “Uh, you mean the girl who slashed my left eye with that carving knife?”

“Yes. After that incident, I looked into her background. It appears her parents abandoned her when she was in middle school.”

Her parents had been young, and they’d gotten addicted to gambling and racked up massive debts. They’d run away in the middle of the night to escape the collectors, leaving Serina behind.

Essentially, they’d sacrificed her to the loan sharks.

“She was living in the dormitory of a brothel when she was taken into protective custody; then she was released into the care of a pair of elderly relatives. She managed to move up to the next grade in school two years late, but she was still emotionally unstable.”

The person who’d devoted himself to supporting her was Tohru, her young cram school teacher.

However…

“When I brought his past crime to light, he turned himself in to the police. As far as Serina was concerned, in serving the

sentence required of him by the law, he'd abandoned her—just like her parents who'd fled in the night."

So she'd recreated her past trauma by sleeping with multiple men.

She'd done it to tell him, *You made me do this. You did the same thing to me my parents did.*

Then could anyone really say the blame was hers alone?

"I took the liberty of telling Serina's foster parents about Tohru. Apparently, while she receives specialized care, the three of them are going to discuss how to handle the child she's carrying. In any case, they told me they wouldn't abandon her, come what may."

Good, thought Seiji.

He really was glad that, at least now, someone would be there for her.

"In Zeami's work, *A Diagram of Two Arts and Three Figures*, there is a certain phrase he uses: 'Demon form, human heart.' 'For though its form is fiendish, it has a human heart.' When we pity those known as *oni*, it is because they still have the heart of a human. That's true of Serina—and no doubt of Shimomura as well."

Why did humans become *oni*?

If it was a result of the way in which they had been raised, could you really call it a sin?

And if so…whose sin was it?

Just as they reached the mouth of the tunnel…

"If we're talking about children born from *oni*, I'm sure I'm the same," Shiroshi murmured.

Seiji racked his brain for something to say, but he came up empty. His thoughts spun in circles, going nowhere, and he couldn't find a single thoughtful remark.

Seiji made a few "um…" and "uh…" noises, then almost without thinking, he reached out and ruffled Shiroshi's hair as if to say, "There, there."

It was met with a full thirty seconds of silence.

Coming to his senses with a jolt, Seiji was just about to start automatically groveling and apologizing when Shiroshi burst into quiet laughter.

“Come to think of it, that may be the first time anyone’s ever patted me on the head,” he said, still chuckling.

“Huh…?”

“…No, perhaps when I was an infant.”

From his expression, Seiji could tell he was thinking of Hibana.

The two boys he’d seen in that photograph had looked like the sort of brothers you’d find anywhere. The sort of big brother who might have patted his little brother on the head.

After all, Hibana had had thirty older brothers—but Shiroshi had been his only little brother in the world.

“I find myself a little jealous of Kazusa and Shirou,” Shiroshi said.

In the gloom of the tunnel, Seiji couldn’t make out his expression.

“ ‘Brothers are strangers in the making,’ as the saying goes, so I’m sure it isn’t always easy. They won’t see eye to eye all the time, and they’re bound to argue. Still, for better or for worse, having someone who affects your life simply by existing is a rare thing indeed.”

Parents and children.

Older and younger brothers.

Once they were lost, neither ever came back.

“…However, family isn’t limited to blood relations.”

Shiroshi had said it so quietly, it sounded as though he’d been talking to himself.

Huh? But before Seiji could ask about it, they stepped out of the tunnel covered in ivy.

For a second, he felt as though time was standing still.

Up ahead of them was the European house, half buried in greenery.

As soon as he saw it, the feeling that he’d missed it welled up inside him, which took him by surprise.

Just maybe…

He might have wanted to come back here.

To the one place in the world where he was allowed to be.

Maybe even the one place where he could say he belonged.

A solitary figure appeared, walking up the brick-paved path.

A gentle wind blew, ruffling the evenly trimmed ends of her black hair as if caressing them with a palm.

It was Beniko, dressed in her usual scarlet and black that reminded him of a goldfish.

“Welcome home.”

When she reached them, she gave a deep bow, and the corners of her lips curved up ever so slightly.

“…Huh? Wait, did she just…?”

It took him another full minute to realize what he’d just seen.

*

In this world, there may be a goldfish who smiles.

MYSTERY 3
RESURRECTION, OR EPILOGUE

“It’s rather like a consultation service,” the young man told Shimomura.

The black business card he’d been handed was printed with the words “Detective Agency” in gold lettering, but the man said he occasionally took consultation work on the side.

“The detective business is something my twin brother and I run together.”

“So your brother is a detective as well, then?”

“Not quite. I’m the only detective; he’s my assistant. Like Holmes and Watson. By the way, we’re fraternal twins, so we look nothing alike. The boy’s a fool who pretends to be clever, though I find that cute— I guess that makes me a doting big brother.”

As he spoke, he scribbled an address on the back of the business card.

“I won’t be with the agency much longer, so please contact me at this address. I’m scheduled to *die* soon, you see.”

His long pale hair fell a little below the nape of his neck, and his androgynous features even looked feminine from certain angles. That may have been why his Inverness cape, a symbol commonly associated with detectives, had looked like a witch’s robe at first glance.

And then…

“I’m looking forward to coming back to life,” said the young man, named Ibara.

He gave a derisive smile, which bloomed like a dark crimson flower across his face.

Like briars and thorns.

The End

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