Taiga Shiki

Illustration by Isshiki



Miri Lives in the Cat's Eyes


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MIRI LIVES

IN THE

CAT'S EYES

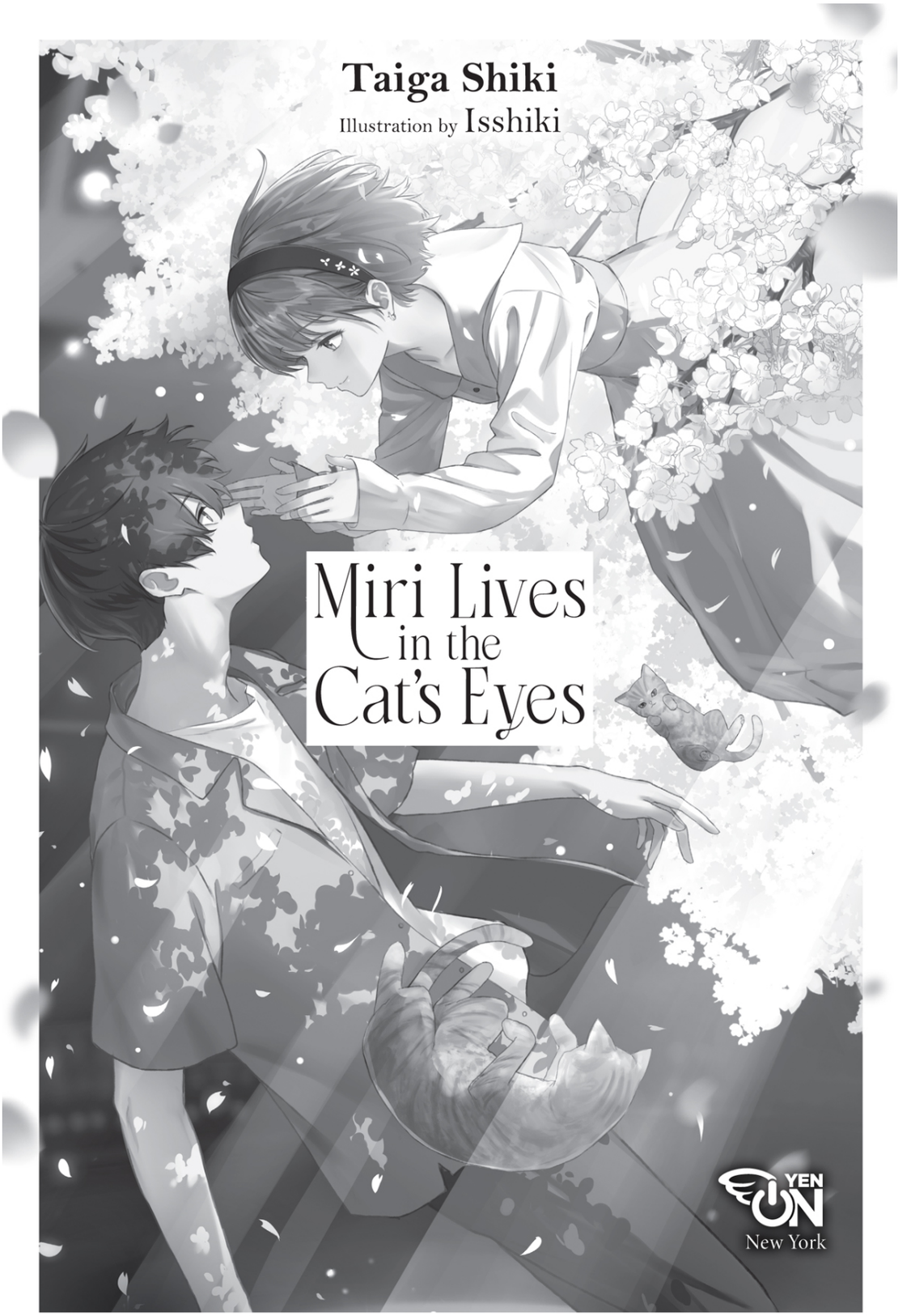
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"Why do you have to die?"
"Because, Yochi,
I love you, too."
"You mean—?"
"Yes. I love you, Yochi."
"Miri, I love you. With all my heart."
"Even though we've never met?"
"But it's almost like
we lived together."
"Yeah, kind of."


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Miri Lives in the Cat's Eyes
YEN ON
New York

Copyright

Miri Lives in the Cat's Eyes

Taiga Shiki

Cover art by **Isshiki**

Translation by **Michael Blaskowsky**

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MILI WA NEKO NO HITOMI NO NAKA NI SUNDEIRU
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Edited by Dengeki Bunko
First published in Japan in 2023 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: March 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Chloe Ling, Ivan Liang
Designed by Yen Press Design: Andy Swist

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Shiki, Taiga, author. | Isshiki, illustrator. | Blaskowsky, Michael, translator.
Title: Miri lives in the cat's eyes / Taiga Shiki ; illustration by Isshiki ; translation by Michael Blaskowsky.
Other titles: Mili wa neko no hitomi no naka ni sundeiru. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2025.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024052783 | ISBN 9798855400250 (trade paperback)
Subjects: LCSH: Time travel —Fiction. | Murder —Fiction. | Love —Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Romance fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PL880.4.H55 M5713 2025 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23/eng/20241115
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024052783

ISBNs: 979-8-8554-0025-0 (paperback)
979-8-8554-0026-7 (ebook)

E3-20250206-JV-NF-ORI

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Yen Newsletter

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Prologue

Those lines were penned more than four hundred years ago, but their vibrancy carries on to this day.

As I spoke the words, I felt something rush through me, like a tightly bound sphere of wind had unraveled, fluttering with new life.

“Yes, very good! That was wonderful!”

Miri smiled, clapping happily. Perhaps it was because she was self-conscious about her small stature. She often exaggerated her gestures and expressed her feelings with her entire body.

“Keep making a big deal about it, and it’ll go right to my head,” I said, scratching the back of my head.

“No, you’re a natural. I can’t believe you’ve never done this before. I think it would sound better if you spoke more from your diaphragm next time.”

“From my diaphragm?”

“Just below your belly button.”

I scanned the paper with my lines printed on it. It was a long monologue by Jaques in *As You Like It*. I began speaking from the base of my stomach while trying to re-create his melancholy facial expressions, tone, and gestures.

I started with “All the world’s a stage—” the way Miri taught me, paying attention to syllable stress and rhythm as if I were playing an instrument. But it was still a bit embarrassing, and I felt my cheeks begin to flush. Saburou, a tabby cat, cocked his head to the side.

“—Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

Finally reaching the end, I picked up Saburou and asked, “How was it this time, Miri?”

Unfortunately, her back was turned and she was busy reaching up for something. She stood on a stool, trying to grab a thick book from her shelf. Book Four of the seven-volume

Hakusuisha Complete Works of Shakespeare. Her flared skirt was a canary yellow and it fluttered as her finger slowly pulled the book forward. I wanted to help her but couldn't, so I waited restlessly.

I suddenly called out in surprise.

The weight of the book broke Miri's balance.

I moved out of pure reflex. But it was a futile attempt that didn't help in the least. Surprised, Saburou's brown fur stood on end as Miri caught herself, clutching the book to her chest with a sigh of relief. She then stepped down and walked toward the desk, absorbing herself in the book.

A soft light entered through the window behind her. The top of her bob cut reflected a halo of light. The translucent amber tips of her light-brown hair faded into her pale cheeks. Miri was always sweet and charming, but her profile radiated an enigmatic beauty that mesmerized me.

My view suddenly lurched forward.

However, my body hadn't moved, so it felt like my brain had misfired and created some phantom inertia. Disoriented, my head spun, and I grew nauseous. Without any input from me, my view moved forward. Under the table, to Miri's feet. I could see the underside of the countertop. Looking down, I saw Miri's toes lined up like piano keys.

"Ah! Stop that! That tickles!"

My vision spun, and I suddenly found myself face-to-face with Miri. We locked eyes, and I felt my heart pound. Her mouth twitched, and her ears immediately flushed red.

"Did—did you just see…?"

I violently shook my head.

"I didn't see anything!"

"Oh, you're lying! You're such a bad actor!"

"Come on, you just said I was really good!"

"Really? You didn't see my underwear? If you're lying… If you're lying…I'm going to slap you, okay?"

"But you can't."

She couldn't. It was against her nature. And the laws of physics.

Miri's bizarre expression was a mixture of frustration, annoyance, and sadness. Then she fanned her face, saying, "My

goodness, it got warm in here."

She stood and opened the sliding door. Her lace curtain shifted in the breeze. Cherry blossom petals danced through a cloudless sky, daintily fluttering into the room like unaddressed letters. Miri's hair swayed gently.

"It's getting hotter over here, too. I'm going to open a window."

I set Saburou down and broke the connection for a moment.

I wiped the sweat that had formed on my brow. I had shut the window because I didn't want my voice to disturb the neighbors, so my room sweltered under the heat and humidity. If the air conditioner isn't fixed soon, this heat might be the death of me. Across the balcony railing, cumulous clouds towered like Mt. Unzen. I opened the window, and the breeze entered. It carried the scent of summer and, with it, the almost overbearing singing of the cicadas.

I looked behind me, spotting a cat perched on a patch of blue sky reflected on the wooden floor. It scratched its ear with its back paw.

This decrepit studio apartment held just Saburou and me. There was no hint of the cute girl anywhere.

I picked up Saburou, looked into his eyes, and made the eye-to-eye *connection*.

Miri was smiling.

I saw her through Saburou's eyes. She spoke, her tone gentle.

"Your Jaques was good, Yochi. And your projection has really improved."

"Thank you," I responded timidly. "Why were you reading the complete works of Shakespeare just now?"

"Oh, that? Well, I was curious to see Dr. Yuushi Odajima's translation."

Miri's room had a large bookshelf crammed with tons of different books—Shakespeare, Kenji Miyazawa, Salinger, Shuji Terayama, manga for girls. It was obvious she loved to read. She kept the room tidy and had added some tasteful decorations. This was the room of a chic young woman, and I felt a little embarrassed glancing around.

"Does the translator really make that much of a difference?"

“It’s like night and day!”

She then read some lines from when princess Rosalind dressed up as a man. Her voice was sweet yet majestic, her enunciation exquisite. I was captivated.

A cute little spectator soon joined us, too. A baby sparrow landed in front of the sliding glass door and began preening its feathers that fluffed up from the spring sun. When it did, *the Saburou in Miri’s room* stirred. Looking back and forth between Miri and the sparrow, he suddenly leaped, and the sparrow calmly flew off into the spring sky. Glass reflected Saburou’s puzzled face. He was still just a wide-eyed kitten who probably hadn’t yet learned the difference between a sparrow and a ball of yarn.

I petted *the Saburou in my room* as I spoke.

“You’ve sure grown up.”

He was a full-grown, dignified cat. He purred, pressing his nose into my palm.

A bird chirped. Looking up, a sparrow had landed on the open doorframe. For a moment, I thought I was seeing the sparrow from Miri’s room, but that couldn’t be.

We have never met in person. Miri and I live in different places and different times, and her Saburou was still a kitten. But we can speak through the eyes of a cat.

The situation appeared complicated, but it was quite simple. Everything is easy to understand once the rules are explained clearly. Kind of like how the utterly chaotic movement of the stars fell into a system of circular motion with the introduction of the heliocentric theory.

As it stands, it wouldn’t be too far off the mark to describe the current situation like this.

Miri lives in the cat’s eyes.



Miri Lives in the Cat's Eyes

Taiga Shiki

Illustration by **Isshiki**

Act 1

1

I clipped my toenails, and my eyes glazed over like I was a dead fish. *Clip…clip…clip.* The sound echoed hollowly through my dim, decrepit apartment. I didn't even feel like cleaning up the pieces that fell to the floor.

Some ragged old professor's lecture on literary history ran in the background on my laptop. I wasn't even all that sure what he was talking about. It was boring me to death, so I had YouTube open in another window. The lecture was being recorded anyway, and it's easier to watch it sped up a day or two before the test.

Honestly, the most efficient thing for me would probably be to just do the assignments and not attend class. But that would be a little too depressing, so I attended classes in real time.

Crunk, crunk, crunk… The air conditioner started making strange noises. My decrepit apartment had its own decrepit air conditioner. Every couple hours, it sputtered like a tunnel-boring machine. It failed miserably at cooling the air, too, so my sweat just seeped out into the humid air.

I had assumed that being a university student in Tokyo would be endless days of excitement and that I might even get a girlfriend. It would happen naturally. I'd study a decent amount, work a little at a part-time job, drink a lot, go on dates, have some lover's spats, and make up. I thought I'd be spending my days happily immersed in normal college stuff like that.

But none of that happened.

Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* begins with:

The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country. The earth lay white under the night sky.

A similar set of simple lines could describe my college life.

“The boy came out of his long days of studying for university entrance exams into the quarantined world. An empty summer lay waiting.”

It was hopeless.

My computer chimed and a chat message appeared on the screen.

Kentarou Sugai: These days, love is nothing but a risk.

I skimmed the message, finished up my toenails, then replied.

Youichi Kamisuki: Love is a risk?

Kentarou Sugai: Isn’t it? First, there’s the risk of getting COVID. And if you get married, you need money for that. On top of our college loans. As it stands now, we’re headed straight into another employment ice age. Plus, salaries in Japan are already abysmal…

Sugai had been so negative lately that it was starting to affect me. I swear he used to be more positive. We first met at a university event, but soon after, all the classes went remote, so maybe I hadn’t had enough time to really get to know him.

The news on YouTube was discussing the spread of the coronavirus. We had passed the peak of infections, and cases were beginning to decline. There were rumors that Kokusai Senan University, where I studied (or didn’t, really), would soon resume in-person classes.

Before long, the news shifted to a story about a male police officer who had lost his gun—apparently, he had left it in a bathroom stall at Shinjuku Station.

I stared blankly at the screen. I just wanted in-person classes to start again. Every day felt so empty, like I’d never go anywhere or do anything meaningful again. Was humanity on the verge of dying off, just like in Sakyo Komatsu’s *Virus*?

Kentarou Sugai: Man, I hope the world ends.

It’s like he read my mind. A quick rush of panic swept through me.

Youichi Kamisuki: You want the world to end?

Kentarou Sugai: Well, that would be more interesting, wouldn't it?

What was he even talking about? Then again, maybe he had a point. Perhaps it's more in line with human nature. Enduring these long, monotonous days might be worse than dying instantly in a blaze of fire.

Crunk, crunk, crunk… The boring machine started up again but soon finished its work.

Somehow, both the literary history lecture and the news had ended without me realizing it. The warm silence stretched on, as dull and endless as flavorless chewing gum.

My mind stagnated. Breathing became difficult. I reached for an anxiety med from my PTP sheet and swallowed it.

My thoughts spiraled into chaos, slowly forming the image of Shinjuku Station. I was alone, walking toward a bathroom stall where the police officer had left his gun behind.

It was an S&W five-shot revolver—the M360J Sakura. Picking it up, the gun felt cold and heavy in my hand. Slowly, I raised the barrel to my temple. I cocked the gun. All that was left was to pull the trigger, fire the bullet, and let the curtain fall on this stale existence once and for all.

I tensed my finger.

—BANG!

I tumbled out of my chair, my heart pounding in my chest. The boundary between dream and reality wavered. Was I losing my mind? That sound just now—it felt real!

A woman's terrified shriek cut through my daze, filled with raw terror.

"Help—!"

BANG! Another gunshot echoed.

I froze.

What felt like an eternity passed as an eerie silence filled the area. The only sound was my heart pounding loudly in the stillness. Knees trembling, I managed to right myself and typed

into the chat.

Youichi Kamisuki: Oh my god, oh my god, I just heard a gunshot!

Kentarou Sugai: WHAT? A gunshot? What is it? Yakuza?

Youichi Kamisuki: I don't know, but I heard a woman scream.

Kentarou Sugai: Seriously? Could it have been a movie?

I stopped typing. That was a possibility, of course.

But it seemed too real, not like sound coming from a speaker.

Youichi Kamisuki: I think it was real. I'm going to check it out.

Kentarou Sugai: Hey, that's dangerous. Don't do it!

I slid open the glass door. A wave of hot, humid air rushed in. A mummified moth lay on the balcony. The partition to the east had a strip of yellow tape that read IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, BREAK AND ESCAPE TO THE NEIGHBORING ROOM. —Break? I thought I was ready…but I hesitated.

I turned around, put on some socks, and came back. Apprehensively, I climbed over to the other side of the railing. Two stories up was higher than it looked. A fall from here would do more than leave a bruise. Carefully inching sideways, the white bone-like handrail squeaked beneath me. Brittle paint and rust flaked off, drifting to the ground.

"Ouch…!"

A thin red line appeared across my rust-covered right hand, blood seeping from where the peeling paint had cut me. I winced at how much it stung, then glanced back up.

And that's when I saw it.

A tabby cat had appeared out of nowhere. Its erect tail swayed back and forth as it balanced, walking along the handrail, heading straight toward me.

I grabbed it and looked into its eyes.

Our eyes locked, and—

—BANG!

The darkness shatters as light pierces the depths of my vision. A startled meow echoes—the cat, napping on the balcony, jolts awake from the gunshot.

My vision swirls. I see someone lying prone on the other side of a screen door. I spot the back of another person as they exit out the front door. Everything happens so fast that I can't tell if it is a man or a woman. A pool of blood spreads across the floor.

I spin around and jump up on the handrail.

I notice a man in a T-shirt and shorts—that is to say, me—shuffling down the handrail…

I was seeing scenes from the past, stored in the cat's eyes.

Eyes are incredible storage devices. They hold more than just visual memories. Those tiny globes carry all five senses, along with the emotions of the person they belong to. For as long as I can remember, I've had this strange ability—to "connect" to someone else's eyes and read their past experiences, like accessing data from a computer hard drive.

I need to hurry and save her…!

Just as I tried to break the connection, the vision changed.

It was a woman's room.

There was a large bookshelf and tasteful decorations. The room was nice.

It felt like a sandstorm had just died down. The scenes I see in people's eyes usually contain some amount of noise. But this room I was seeing…was calm. A smooth silence and silky light filled the space. It was like actually being there.

A woman looked at me, her brownish-beige hair in a bob. Her large eyes were anxious and open wide. The irises shone an almost hazel color, or a light brown with flecks of green. My mouth hung agape. I couldn't look away.

She suddenly yelled out.

"Watch out! The handrail is going to break!"

In that very moment, a terrible crack echoed as the handrail gave way. The neighbor's brick wall crumbled, scattering their bonsai.

I grabbed onto the balcony just before it collapsed. Quarantine had left me out of shape, and it took all my strength to hang on. Gravity kept pulling at me… Gritting my teeth, I used every ounce of energy to pull myself back up. I collapsed onto my hands and knees, gasping for breath. That could've ended horribly if that woman hadn't warned me.

—And then it hit me.

Eyes only show me scenes from the past.

So how had a woman from the past warned me about something in the future—?

The cat, unfazed by the chaos, groomed its belly as if nothing had happened. My heart raced. Nervously, I reached out toward it, but the cat sprang up, causing me to pull my hand back. It glanced at me briefly before slipping through the partition and heading toward my room.

"…First things first…"

My voice rasped in my throat. I had to help her.

I stood on shaky legs and opened the squeaking screen door. Its shadow slid off her pale legs, like coarse stockings being pulled away. For some reason, I instinctively muffled my footsteps as I entered the room. The metallic smell of fresh blood hit me hard.

I buried my face in my hands, squeezing out a breath.

She had died instantly. There was no doubt.

It looked like she had tried to run for the front door but had been shot in the back of the head. Her body had fallen forward.

The woman appeared to be around my age. She wore a blouse and shorts that accentuated her long legs. I could see the left side of her face—she was pretty, with a sharp nose, a pointed chin, and a graceful E-line.

"It might not be too late…"

Trembling, I forced myself over to the body. Carefully avoiding the pool of blood, I bent down and rested my left cheek on the floor, staring into her eyes. Framed by thick lashes, her large eyes were now hollow, tear-streaked wells. Though her tear ducts had dried, droplets still clung to her gaze. The bullet's exit wound

jutted out of her forehead. I fought the urge to vomit.

When a person died, the memories stored in their eyes quickly faded, like their soul was leaving the body. But this was so close to the moment of death—there might still be a chance to glimpse a clue about who killed her.

I locked onto her gaze, making the connection.

Her memories surged forth, accompanied by the deep, crimson sensation of death. Most of the memories had already disintegrated. The images were blurred, the voices distorted, and time itself seemed to warp—

A scream.

The sound of breaking glass.

A web of cracks flash across a mirror, reflecting a face filled with terror.

Turning around, I see a gun—an M360J Sakura.

I fling out my arms and run like an animal fleeing death.

My heart pounds.

My long hair obscures my field of vision.

An intense pain, and there's an explosion of vivid flowers. Pixelated, glitchy flowers bloom as the bullet destroys the visual cortex at the base of my skull.

A pitch-black cavity gapes in place of the stamen and pistil, sucking up the glimmering petals in an instant, eventually swallowing every last thing around it, like a swirling black hole.

It feels like I'm about to disappear into that darkness, too, and I scream. I feel the "touch of death" with terrifying clarity. The cold of absolute zero penetrates the very core of my soul. It ebbs and flows like a violent wave, shattering me as necrosis slowly begins to set in before I'm finally carried away.

I try to break the connection but can't. It feels like a nightmare I can't wake up from. I grit my teeth and resolutely put all my force into the nape of my neck, and—

I snapped back to reality.

The face of the corpse lay before me, and it felt as though I had crawled out of the hole in her forehead. A strange pain throbbed in my chest, and I scratched at it. Coughing like I was trying to

dislodge a Ping-Pong ball stuck in my throat, I finally caught my breath. The touch of death had never felt so vivid. My body was cold as stone, yet my heart felt like it was on fire. I retched, but there was nothing in my stomach.

Unsteadily, I rose to my feet.

The bullet was lodged in her makeup mirror, spiderwebbing cracks running across its surface. Lipstick had fallen to the floor near my feet, and only her lower lip was painted red.

My mind wandered. So this was how it had happened. She had been doing her makeup when the first shot missed and hit the mirror. The second shot had struck her as she tried to flee…

But anyone could have figured that out just by looking at the room.

Ultimately, my ability had been of no help whatsoever.

After giving my report to the police, I didn't make it back to my apartment until seven in the evening. I could still hear officers filing in and out of the apartment next door. After so much time spent holed up alone, all the sudden activity left me shaking with exhaustion.

I took my anxiety meds and collapsed into bed. My forehead burned fiercely, and vivid images of flowers flickered behind my eyes. The cold, piercing sensation of death stabbed into my brain like icicles.

School would expect an explanation for why I missed my other classes. But I couldn't move. I should just sleep. Maybe a group of elves would come in the night and hook me up to a nutritional IV, like something out of *The Elves and the Shoemaker* by the Brothers Grimm.

I was just starting to drift into a light sleep when I heard it.

—*Meow.*

The faint call of a cat.

I jumped out of bed.

The curtains to the sliding door were still open, and the light from my room illuminated the cat lying on the balcony. I hesitated for a moment, then placed a bowl on the floor and poured some milk before slowly opening the door.

The cat sauntered in like it did this every day and helped itself

to the milk.

“I completely forgot about you…”

As I stroked the back of its neck, the cat raised its tail and squinted happily. Once it had finished the milk, I picked up the bowl. This cat was far too comfortable with people to be a stray, but it didn’t seem like anyone was looking after it. No collar, either.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the woman I had seen through the cat’s eyes. How had she spoken to me from the past? And how had she warned me that the handrail was about to break?

One simple explanation came to mind, but it was too outlandish to believe. There was no way it could be true. The only way to know for sure was to confirm it with the woman herself.

I looked into the cat’s eyes—

The scene from earlier replayed in my head. The gunshot, the figure lying prone behind the screen door, the pool of blood spreading across the floor…

My ability has rules. When I look into someone’s eyes, the first thing I usually see is a memory tied to their most recent powerful emotion. That’s why I saw the memory of the cat’s “surprise” from earlier.

After that, I can start searching. I can choose an approximate time, like searching for a word on the internet. Of course, it depends on the person’s emotions, and sometimes I lose control.

I wandered through its memories, like pressing into the waves of the ocean.

Eventually, some strange, unknown gravity began to pull me in.

Before I knew it, I was standing in front of that woman.

The room around her was filled with tasteful decorations and a large bookshelf. For the briefest moment, her eyes glistened with the hint of tears. A vague sadness seemed to wash over her face, flickering in her eyes and cheeks like the soft hues of twilight. But just as quickly, it faded like a mirage, and she smiled brightly.



“Yochi, for you, this is the first time we’ve met, right? I’m Miri Yuzunoha. *Yuzunoha* is written as ‘leaf of the yuzu tree,’ and *Miri* is ‘beautiful village.’”

So she *was* talking to me from the past…! I asked, my voice trembling, “Yochi…?”

“A future Youichi said I could call you that. The first time I met you, it was under cherry trees in full bloom.”

“A future me…? So it’s true. You—”

The woman from the cat’s eyes nodded in confirmation.

“I can see the future.”

2

The train doors closed behind me. I checked my distance from others and took a deep breath. The pandemic had largely subsided, but being inside a train still unsettled me. Every cough set me on edge, and my breathing instinctively grew shallow. The cat carrier, litter box, cat food, and other supplies I bought at the Takadanobaba pet shop weighed down my hands.

Carrying all that made it hard to pass through the ticket gates, and after exiting Komagome Station, I removed my mask. The fresh air of early summer greeted me, reminding me of childhood. Smell and memory are deeply intertwined. These days, memories feel fleeting, probably because of the constant masking during the pandemic.

It took about ten minutes to walk back to my apartment. I climbed the old, weathered exterior staircase and made my way down the slightly grimy hallway. Nodding to the police officers going in and out of room 204, I continued to my own door—room 203, second from the end. The grim-colored door, a shade I’d dubbed veggie juice green, creaked open. I slipped off my shoes, and my new roommate came to greet me.

“Saburou, I’m home.”

He mewed in reply. That was the name the woman in his eyes had called him.

Saburou eagerly jumped into the litter box as soon as it was set up. He must’ve been waiting—a cat with manners. I poured

food into his bowl, and his eyes narrowed into slits as he ate, tail swaying while I petted him.

After he finished, I picked him up and gazed into his eyes.

The scene appeared again: the woman sitting on a cushion, smiling and waving both hands at me. The image came through as clearly as before, free of distortion.

“Yochi, hello. Did you sleep well?”

“I dreamed that elves were building a castle on my stomach.”

“A castle?”

“I woke up and Saburou was sleeping on me.”

Her laughter bloomed like a flower.

“Did you sleep well, Ms. Yuzunoha?”

“Call me Miri. And here, it’s only been about ten minutes since we last talked.”

“What—?” I fumbled. “Oh, I get it. We’re having a conversation between the past and the future, connected at ‘a certain point in time,’ so the same amount of time doesn’t pass for both of us.”

Now that I noticed, she was wearing the same white shirt and canary yellow skirt as before. Time flowed differently between here and there—so if I broke the connection now, the next time I speak with Miri could be three seconds later or three days later.

I thought of the second tale in *The Elves and the Shoemaker*: A servant girl becomes the godmother to an elf child and spends three days with them, only to return to her village and discover seven years had passed.

“How many years in my past are you?” I asked.

“About three. Saburou’s still a kitten here,” she said, gently stroking his head with her left hand. I could feel the “memory” of that sensation. It rattled me. Experiencing what it felt like to be a kitten, the soft fur, the sensation of Miri’s delicate fingers…

“What happened to your finger?” I asked, noticing something.

“Oh, this?” She held up her left hand, showing a bandage wrapped around her pointer finger. “I cut myself while slicing an avocado yesterday. I’m a bit of a klutz,” she said with a laugh. “I may be small, but I still manage to bang my head on everything. And I’m really sensitive to pain. I cry a little every time.”

I laughed, feeling some of the tension ease. “So getting your ears pierced must’ve been tough, huh?”

“Oh, these are clip-ons.” She took off her earrings and showed

them to me. “I’m too scared to get my ears pierced. But there’s less variety with clip-ons, and it’s really hard to find a pair I like. It’s not easy being me,” she joked, eyebrows lifting as she laughed.

We chatted for a while before a brief silence fell between us.

Eventually, I noticed a subtle tension in the air. Saburou’s ears perked up.

“Say,” I started, “how does all of this work? I can see the memories stored within someone’s eyes when I look into them, but I can’t control it well. Memories jump around, and I’m pulled toward those with strong emotional links. So something like this —picking out an ordinary memory—it’s really hard. But here I am, talking with you again, like something drew me here…”

Miri looked at me seriously. “Yochi, do you believe in fate?”

“Fate?” The sudden shift caught me off guard. “I don’t know about fate. I don’t trust the morning horoscopes on TV.”

Miri didn’t laugh.

“Fate exists, whether you believe in it or not. I can see it. Or at least the shadow it casts.”

I hesitated, then said, “If you say so, I’ll take your word for it. Maybe fate really does exist.”

“Thank you,” Miri said softly. “What do you think fate looks like?”

I thought about it, then decided to have a little fun. “Like stains from the bottom of a coffee cup.”

“Oh, that’s a great answer!” Miri said excitedly. “That could be true from certain angles. Like how a wall clock looks like a line when seen from the side.”

“And how do you see it, Miri?”

“I see it like raindrops running down a train window.” Miri’s pupils seemed to swell. “We are each like a single water molecule, joining and separating with the passage of time, each following our own path. And we are influenced by other droplets, the wind, the train, the Earth, and even larger forces… And I can see it. Seeing it means I can interfere with it. I can’t control the train, but I can change its path at certain junctions.”

“So the two of us talking right now. That’s because of your powers?”

“I’m making that kind of future happen.”

I shook my head in disbelief. This was extraordinary.

“And now a certain train has started running beyond my control,” Miri whispered. “That shooting… It’s the start of a series of murders.”

A chill ran through me.

“A series of murders…?”

“Unless someone— No. Unless you, Yochi, change its course.”

My mind reeled. “Me?” I stammered.

“Yes.” Miri nodded. “You’re the only one who can change this fate. If you don’t find the killer, the murders will continue.”

“What…?” I pressed my hands to my head, trying to process it. “Wait. Miri, if you can see the future, can’t you see what I’ll do? Can’t you see who the killer is?”

Miri shook her head. “There are limits to what I can see and how much I can interfere with fate. I don’t know who the killer is, and I don’t know if you’ll stop them.”

I swallowed hard. The touch of death I had felt when reliving the gunshot came flooding back—the flicker of light, the suffocating fear. My heart pounded, and cold sheen of sweat covered my skin. I was trembling.

“I can’t do it. I’m not smart enough to solve a murder, and I’m not strong enough to fight someone with a gun. I can see the past, but that’s all. It’s like a strange record player.”

“That’s not true!” Miri insisted. “You’re incredibly smart and strong.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Because I’ve seen the future. And from what you’ve said so far, I can tell—you *will* try to find the killer.”

I shook my head. Then I cut the connection.

Saburou wriggled out of my arms and stretched on the floor, as if commenting on how long that conversation had been. For some reason, Saburou always sat patiently when Miri and I talked.

At some point, it started to rain. Drops of water ran down the sliding glass door. I focused on one—a large drop that looked like it would travel straight down the glass.

I watched it for a while.

Then, suddenly, it veered sharply to one side, rushing toward a destination I never would have guessed.

3

The doorbell roused me from a restless sleep. I hadn't slept a wink all night and had just drifted off, thanks to a slightly heavier dose of anxiety meds and sleeping pills than usual.

The TV was still on, the news discussing yesterday's shooting. My familiar, decrepit apartment, the somber tone of the newscaster. They had moved on to criticizing the officer who lost his gun.

The doorbell rang again. Slowly, I became aware of my awkward, slumped body. I glanced at the clock. It was ten AM on a Saturday. This apartment didn't have the luxury of an intercom system. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, I tried to fix my hair. The doorbell rang once more. "I'm coming, I'm coming…," I mumbled, thrusting my feet into my sandals. I unlocked the door, released the chain, and pulled it open.

A devastated couple stood there.

A smoky gray air, tinged with a bluish-black hue, seemed to creep into my apartment. They were dressed in all black, their clothes somehow hesitant, as if reluctant to cling to their bodies. His stubble and her patchy makeup looked fragile, ready to unravel like the loose threads of a frayed cloth.

"Hello. We're sorry to disturb you so early in the morning…," the man said, his voice strained. He appeared to be in his early fifties. "We're the parents of Karin Amagasaki. She lived next door."

It dawned on me that this was the first time I'd heard the dead woman's name.

"Hello…" I bowed slightly, feeling confused.

"They say you rushed over when you heard the gunshot. Thank you."

Apparently, they had come to express their gratitude. Still groggy, I struggled to process their words. Karin Amagasaki had been a student at the same university, a year ahead of me. The mother burst into tears as she explained that her daughter's autopsy was underway, and they didn't know when her body would be returned.

Something felt off. My gaze drifted downward, to a fresh

bandage wrapped around the mother's left wrist. It looked recent, contrasting with her suntan. The more I observed, the more details sharpened in my mind—her disheveled hair, pale skin, puffy eyes, and an aura of raw vulnerability.

The father asked me to recount the day of the incident, so I described it in detail, leaving out, of course, any mention of the cat or my ability to see into the past.

As I spoke, the mother kept looking at me, as if searching for something, anything to cling to. Our eyes met.

I sensed danger. A strange sense of duty told me not to look away.

There is one condition for me to make an eye-to-eye connection.

With human beings, the person must have tears in their eyes.

For anything other than a human, like Saburou, I can make a connection anytime, but with humans, that condition is a must. Presumably, their rational minds act as a security measure, a defense mechanism. Only when they're crying do those defenses falter, if only slightly.

Thankfully, Amagasaki's mother was already crying.

I looked into her eyes, and—

Her memories rushed toward me instantly, like a shaken can of soda bursting open. The "force" of those memories was overwhelming. I was drowning in them in an instant, my mind bubbling, my hippocampus irreparably stained. I quickly broke the connection.

Tears streamed down my face.

The parents, bewildered, glanced at each other in confusion. I needed to make some kind of excuse, but all I could do was sob. The mother began crying with me.

"I'm so sorry," the father said. "You're in shock, too, and we showed up out of the blue…"

I wanted to tell them that wasn't the reason, but I couldn't speak.

They left, and I slowly shut the door behind them. I stood there for a while, crying in the entryway. Suddenly, my stomach

churned, and I rushed to the toilet to throw up. It felt as though the carbonation from those memories had soaked into my bones, turning them to jelly.

4

A pair of eyes open in the darkness.

A piece of salmon flies through the air, flailing wildly as it sails before landing on the floor with a splat. A plate shatters.

They're having a terrible fight—a torrent of curses brimming with murderous intent. It's escalating fast. Another plate becomes a casualty, and a second piece of salmon is launched across the room.

I sigh in annoyance.

In the next moment, I contort my face and begin to cry, adopting a childlike tone to stir their pity.

"Please, Dad, Mom, don't fight. Calm down and let's eat this salmon."

I pick the salmon off the floor, place it back on the broken plate, and return it to the table before taking a bite. Mom and Dad, looking crestfallen, stop arguing. They must have realized how foolish they were acting.

"I'm so sorry," Mom says softly. "I'll cook more salmon. You should go wash your mouth…"

As she heads to the kitchen, I walk to the bathroom. Once there, I spit the salmon I had pretended to eat into a tissue, throwing it in the trash. I glance at my reflection in the mirror—there's no hint of sadness. My eyes are slightly red, but there's no trace that I'd been crying.

I smile.

I am so smart. So adorable.

5

A pair of eyes open in the darkness.

An announcement informs us that the fourth-year students'

play is about to begin.

"They will be performing *Romeo and Juliet*."

The gym falls silent as the curtains rise. Handmade scenery and props sit beneath a banner that reads THEATER FESTIVAL. With each grade, the quality of the props has improved, and I find myself admiring how well crafted they are.

Children step onto the stage from the wings and begin to recite their lines. I wait and wait for the lead to appear.

And then she steps into the spotlight.

The stage is instantly transformed, as if adorned with an elegant flower hairpin. She wears the handmade dress that had cut my hands so badly while making it—her Juliet, a vision of pure, innocent beauty. A wave of soft sighs ripples through the audience's hushed calm.

"Karin is easily the best one out there," my husband whispers in my ear. "She could be an actress someday."

My daughter, an actress.

The thought makes my heart bloom, warming me like the first day of spring.

My life has felt like a plain rag.

I remember the first year of elementary school, when everyone brought out their rags to clean the classroom. My three friends had rags embroidered with flowers, animals, or anime characters. Mine was the only plain one. Looking back, that rag feels like a metaphor for my life—never pure white, but rather a dull, stained color of an ordinary, tarnished existence. The only part of me that has ever felt pure is my fair skin, my secret source of pride.

And now my daughter—who shares half my DNA—stands on that stage with that same fair skin, bathed in the spotlight, her cheeks glowing. I place my left hand over my chest and feel my pulse quicken. As she shines in the spotlight, the light seems to reach me, distant but glowing like a firefly.

The play ends, and the curtain call begins. The children stand in a line, raising their joined hands high. The house lights come up, allowing the kids to see the audience. You find the two of us, burst into a smile, and wave. I grasp my husband's hand with my left, and we wave together. The only reason we're still married is because our Karin wedged herself between us.

Our Karin.
You are so smart. So adorable.

6

A pair of eyes open in the darkness.

A woman's face reflects in the mirror. She looks somewhere in her forties. But she seems strangely aged, like an old woman. Laugh lines have etched valleys beneath her swollen eyes. Her cheeks sag, and saliva trickles out the side of her mouth. Her animal moans neither sob nor growl, her gray-streaked hair wild, hands tearing the skin on her head. The bright-red fingertips of her right hand grip a shaving razor. She howls as though she is about to burst.

Touching the blade to her left wrist—

7

I leaped out of bed, covered in sweat, feeling as cold as ice. Pressing down on a fierce pain in my left wrist, I was certain I would find bright-red blood gushing between my fingers.

—Fearfully, I pulled my right hand away.

But my wrist was completely fine.

I exhaled and wiped the sweat from my face, realizing it was one of the remnants of memories. Fragments from the memories that had flooded into me from her eyes still lingered in the depths of my mind, appearing in my dreams.

Francis Crick, the scientist who identified the double helix structure of DNA, once proposed that dreams are the brain's way of processing information. According to that theory, the memories that had passed through my eyes had stained my brain and, during sleep, intermingled with my own memories, causing me to dream from someone else's perspective.

In the span of a single night, I had experienced life as both Karin Amagasaki and her mother.

As I had suspected, her mother had cut her own wrists. My body had absorbed her dangerous mental state. The balance

between life and death can be tipped in either direction, even with the weight of a single razor blade.

A girl in my high school volleyball club who often cut her wrists once told me that doing it was like breathing. She said she was just a species of guppy. And just like guppies can only breathe underwater, she could only breathe in darkness, with the cuts as her gills. She would show her scars to anyone, which eventually became such a problem that the school expelled her. If what she said was true, then Karin's mother was struggling to find a new way to breathe, to survive.

I showered, opened the sliding glass door, and sat down.

Summer clouds drifted lazily across the sky. Saburou came up to me and stretched out over my lap. I stroked his soft belly.

Taking a deep breath, I stood up.

Sitting at my desk, I began typing on my computer, carefully choosing the right words. Even Saburou coming up for affection couldn't break my focus. About two hours later, I finally finished. I printed it out, sealed it in a light blue envelope, and used a ruler to disguise my handwriting. On the front, I wrote:

A Letter from the Deceased

8

I took a long-distance bus from Shinjuku Station to Kofu City in Yamanashi Prefecture. The ride took just over two hours, and it was the farthest I had traveled from Tokyo since moving there. I left Saburou at home. I slept through most of the ride, probably because I hadn't slept well the night before due to the remnants of memories.

The air was thick and muggy when I got off at Kofu Station. The sun blazed overhead, making it feel even hotter than in Tokyo. It was two in the afternoon. I walked into CELEO Kofu, grabbed something for lunch, and headed up to the sixth floor.

Toward the Misaka Mountains, the peak of a blue Mt. Fuji glimmered beneath a sky filled with bubbling cumulonimbus clouds.

I sat down on a bench and unfolded a piece of paper. As they

were leaving yesterday, Karin's parents had given me their phone number and address so I could contact them. I double-checked the route to their house on my phone's map.

I took another bus through Kofu City and then walked through a quiet suburb for about ten minutes.

Suddenly, a powerful feeling of déjà vu hit me.

The house—it should be just ahead.

I turned the corner as if something was leading me.

And there it was: the Amagasaki house, a single-story home that looked fifty or sixty years old. Time and space seemed to warp, disorienting me. This was the house from my dreams. When I was Karin Amagasaki, when I was her mother, I had lived here. My chest tightened with an indescribable sadness.

I pulled the letter out of my backpack and placed it on the doormat.

Just then I sensed a presence behind me. Instinctively, I ducked into the yard. I knew where to hide. I had played hide-and-seek here before.

"Huh? What's this…?"

Her father had returned from walking their dog. He picked up the light-blue envelope, adjusted his reading glasses, and eyed it suspiciously. Without hesitation, he pulled out the letter and rushed inside the house. The Shiba dog he left behind circled three times before settling into its doghouse.

Oh no. The dog was blocking my exit.

I heard footsteps approaching and immediately ducked under the porch. Karin's mother and father came out and sat on the porch, their four calves now lined up in front of my eyes.

"A *Letter from the Deceased*…? Is this some kind of joke?"

"It doesn't seem like it. There are things in here that only Karin would know, and it even sounds like her writing."

The contents of the letter weren't completely made up. It came from the memories of a dead person that had stained my mind, memories that I used to write it. In a way, it was essentially a form of necromancy.

"Dear Mom and Dad…," her mother began, reading the letter aloud.

Dear Mom and Dad,

I'm using a very special method to have someone write this letter on my behalf. This has all happened so suddenly that I still haven't processed it all, and I'm sure it's the same for you, too. I feel so horrible thinking about that.

The reason I'm writing this letter is that, simply, I'm worried about you, Mom. I can't bear that I'm the reason you're suffering this much.

The three of us used to sit on the porch eating watermelon and watching the clouds. Dad, I remember how you would spit the seeds so far, then we'd find sprouts in our yard, which we'd grow into fruit, and laugh as we'd eat together. For some reason, I get sleepy when I eat watermelon, so I always used to use your lap as a pillow, Mom. I loved grabbing your left hand as it tickled my ear and making it stroke my cheek. Your skin was so soft, Mom, and cool like kitchen tiles… It felt wonderful.

It's summer here in heaven. There are clouds, watermelon, and a porch. I can be anything I want here. Know that I'll be waiting for you, looking like a child with round red cheeks like apples polished on a sleeve. All while chilling watermelon in crisp, clear spring water. Please, live long, full lives and bring lots of stories to tell me. The three of us will eat watermelon and I'll doze on your lap while you tell me those long, lovely stories. When we meet again, Mom, please stroke my cheeks.

I love you.

Karin

Her mom wailed, calling out Karin's name through her sobs. The four calves huddled together. In the darkness, a mix of emotions passed through me.

But at least I was able to let her cry. It was like opening the cap on a plastic bottle a little and gently releasing the carbonation inside.

I imagined the scales.

The letter settled on the side opposite the razor, and the scales tilted away from the blade.

9

After finally escaping the Amagasaki house, random notions swirled through my head—things I couldn't even call proper thoughts. They persisted even after I was back in my apartment, lying in bed.

I'm such a coward. I want to help people, but I'm too afraid to face any danger head-on. I've always been like this. I couldn't do anything at all, even back then.

A solitary umbrella dances upward in the darkness behind my eyelids.

A bright-red umbrella.

It flutters against a backdrop of gloomy black clouds.

The umbrella falls beside a yellow raincoat, a schoolbag hanging from its back.

A red bag—a girl's.

Her eyes, wide with shock, stare in my direction.

And with frightening speed, the light in those eyes vanishes…

The sleeping pills must have worked because, at some point, I had fallen asleep. After wandering through a bewildering tempest, I had finally broken through into the eye of the storm. A serene, golden light filled the space.

Miri's dream.

She relaxed in her room with its bookshelf. Light seeped through the lace curtain, warming her soft, delicate hair. A hairpin decorated with a cherry blossom flower sparkled above her ear. Why did it feel like I had seen this before? I couldn't recall from where, though.

Miri continued to read quietly. She looked so very beautiful.

10

I drank a cup of water right after waking up. Nothing else passed my lips.

"Saburou, come here."

Rising from his nap, Saburou's ears perked up, and he came

over, hoping for some food. I hadn't planned on feeding him, but I felt bad for him. So I filled his bowl with cat food.

Then I looked into his eyes, and—

Something pulled me forward, and Miri appeared in my field of view. It seemed to be a different day than the last time we met. She wore a light-green oversized sweater made for spring, its long sleeves waving as she greeted me with a cheerful "Hello, Yochi!"

"Good morning, Miri. I just woke up."

"I thought so. Your hair is still a mess."

I patted my bedhead, trying to smooth it down, but it popped back up as soon as I removed my hand. Miri laughed, her teeth showing in a wide smile.

"Miri, there's something I want to tell you about today…," I started, then told her about the letter from the deceased.

"This isn't the first time. I've written a lot of those letters. They caused quite a stir in town, almost becoming an urban legend. I made mistakes at first, but I gradually got better and helped a lot of people." My voice faltered. Miri listened attentively, then spoke.

"But now you're starting to have doubts about what you're doing, right?"

I was stunned. It was like she had read my mind.

"…That's right. I think so. Isn't it hypocritical? Peering into someone's memories without their permission, then writing a letter on their behalf… Who am I to do that? But I'm also scared that something terrible will happen if I don't do anything. In the end, it's all just to make *me* feel better."

A silence filled the room. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but one that felt protective, like waiting for the wings of a newly emerged insect to harden. Finally, Miri spoke.

"But what makes something actually 'good'?"

"Actually good?"

"For example, what if I killed someone?"

I was shocked. Miri, killing someone? She couldn't hurt a fly, much less a person. "Killing someone is 'bad,' of course," I replied.

“But I can see the future. What if that person is going to kill fifty thousand people someday?”

I hesitated.

“…Then that would be ‘good,’ I guess.”

“Really? But what if each of those fifty thousand people was going to kill fifty thousand more?”

“But now you’re just speculating, aren’t you?”

“Exactly. If you can’t know everything, then the ‘what ifs’ are endless. They’re inescapable. There’s nothing you can do about it.”

“…I guess so.”

“In the end, I believe the boundaries of our knowledge define the boundaries of our ethics. If you don’t know about the fifty thousand victims, then killing one person is ‘bad.’ I can see the future, and you can see the past. We know things others don’t, so our ethics are different, too. We have to follow our own personal morality.”

“But isn’t that personal morality just something we use to make ourselves feel better about our decisions?”

“That’s exactly what morals are—ways to help you feel satisfied with your choices. We’re not gods. With the knowledge of gods, the good and bad in the human world would seem trivial. All humans can do is try their best while figuring things out along the way.”

The knowledge of gods… I broke out in goose bumps. A terrifying thought hit me.

“With what you know, was yesterday’s letter from the deceased a good thing? Or was it bad? You know what happens if the letter arrives and if it doesn’t, right?”

Miri looked at me, silent. This silence was heavy, like it would prevent those fragile wings from ever fully unfurling. After a long pause, she spoke, her expression unchanged.

“It was ‘good.’ If the letter hadn’t arrived, the mother would have killed herself, and the father would have wasted away and died the following year.”

I sighed with relief, the tension leaving my shoulders. I had saved their lives. A warmth spread through my chest at the realization.

“Miri,” I said, my resolve hardened. “I’m going to find this

killer. Honestly, I'm scared, and I don't know if I can do it. But if I'm the only one who can help, then I want to try."

Miri smiled warmly. "I knew you'd say that. Well, I believed you would. Let's catch this killer!"

She shook Saburou's paw.

I shook his paw, too, and laughed.

Act 2

1

In an action movie, this would be the part where I'd start training in karate or kung fu to prepare for a showdown with the final boss. But instead, I started with reading.

"Read *As You Like It*. I need to make lunch," Miri said with a smile, waving both hands. How could I say no when she asked like that?

I didn't feel like going outside, so I bought a digital copy. While waiting for it to download, my Monday online class started, and a message from Sugai popped up. Time flew by as I filled him in on everything that had happened (leaving out, of course, the parts about Miri and seeing the past).

My afternoon classes were canceled for the day. Apparently, the school administration had a lot to discuss.

I fed Saburou, heated up a frozen meal, and started reading Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. It was my first time reading a play, and I couldn't really get into it at first. My thoughts drifted to Miri instead. How old was she? There didn't seem to be much of an age gap between us. Did she live alone? Could she be a college student like me?

Eventually, the script hooked me, and despite a few interruptions from Saburou, I managed to finish it.

By the time I was done, evening had settled in. I looked into Saburou's eyes—

Miri sat in the afternoon sun, still wearing the same clothes as this morning.

"What did you think of Shakespeare?" she asked.

"I was surprisingly riveted. His phrasing is so sophisticated. It's hard to believe it was written four hundred years ago."

“I know! Shakespeare is just amazing.”

Miri’s eyes sparkled as she launched into the finer points of Shakespearean literature. I loved watching her expressions change as she spoke. She had gone completely off topic, but she seemed to be enjoying herself, so I didn’t interrupt.

“What’s that smell? Is something burning?”

Saburou’s sensitive nose twitched, picking up the scent. I noticed a haze of smoke wafting around Miri.

“Huh—?” She glanced around, her eyes widening.

Suddenly, she yelped and bolted out of my view. *The Saburou in her time* followed her. Miri’s home was much larger than I had imagined—it looked like a high-end city apartment. Through the lace curtain, I could see the tops of buildings. A one-hundred-inch TV, a sleek sofa, a glass table, a long fur rug, decorative plants… A quick look revealed an array of high-quality furnishings.

Smoke billowed from a frying pan on her kitchen island.

“Oh, no, no, no, no!”

Flustered, Miri flailed her arms like a character in a manga.

“Miri, turn off the burner!” I yelled instinctively, though I knew she couldn’t hear me.

She turned off the burner and grabbed a hand towel. As she did, a knife fell off the counter and lodged itself in the floor, narrowly missing Saburou, who leaped out of the way. Miri wet the towel and tossed it into the pan, sending up a loud hiss of steam.

Seeing that everything was under control, I exhaled in relief. Miri slumped in disappointment, holding Saburou as she returned to the room with the bookshelf.

“Noooo…,” she whimpered, looking ready to cry. “I only wanted to talk to you for a second, and now…”

“I thought you’d finished lunch already. You can’t walk away from an open flame, you know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You can be a little absent-minded sometimes, can’t you? Didn’t you see a future where you burned the frying pan?”

“Oh, come on! Don’t be mean!” She pouted.

I felt bad for her, but I couldn’t help laughing.

I broke the connection for a moment, and when I reconnected, a fair amount of time seemed to have passed. Miri had tidied up

the kitchen and finished her lunch. She resumed our conversation as if nothing had happened.

“So the reason I asked you to read Shakespeare is because you need to join the university Drama Club.”

“The Drama Club?” I blurted. “What? Why the Drama Club?!”

“Well…” Miri paused for a moment. “If you were in a maze and saw a sign pointing to the exit, you’d follow it, right?”

“Sure.”

“The exit is through the Drama Club.”

“Really?”

I sighed. Miri looked at me sympathetically. “I know it’ll be tough, but you can do it. We have a week until the auditions.”

“Wait, there are auditions?!”

“That’s right. The club’s uniquely charismatic leader screens all entrants.”

“Seriously? Kung fu would have been easier.”

“Kung fu?” Miri cocked her head.

“It’s nothing. But I’ve never acted before. Do you think I can learn a monologue in a week?”

“You’ll be fine. I’ll help you.” Miri puffed up with pride.

“Miri, have you ever acted before?”

“A little. Don’t worry, if you practice hard, I know you’ll pass! I saw it in the future.”

“I don’t know about this.” A sense of unease crept up like smoke from a frying pan.

“All right then, we start with practicing enunciation—”

Miri continued excitedly, oblivious to any smoke for a second time.

2

The week passed quickly. Shockingly quickly. Miri and I would chat between my online classes, then practice after school. I found the routine enjoyable and would have been happy to continue like that forever—until, just as Miri predicted, my university resumed in-person classes, and I had to physically return to school.

I took the train from Komagome Station to Takadanobaba,

then walked about twenty minutes to campus.

A wave of nostalgia hit me as I set foot on campus. It had been a while.

Sneaking into the shadows, I opened Saburou's carrier and let him out. Miri had told me to bring him, saying he would be essential later. Saburou glanced back at me once, then casually wandered off.

I headed toward my psychology classroom. Hand sanitizer was set up by the door, and a sign warned that private conversations were forbidden. I picked a random seat and immediately overheard people ignoring the no-talking rule.

"My boyfriend and I started living remotely."

"Living remotely?"

"We leave a video chat open all the time so we can talk to each other all day long."

Wow, what a modern concept. Young people are so creative.

"I've been cleaning more and paying attention to my appearance. It's the best."

I, too, had cleaned my room, using my meager savings to build a catwalk for Saburou. I'd even started washing my face in the morning and changing out of my pajamas.

In a way, wasn't my connection with Miri also a form of living remotely?

The thought made me blush, my cheeks flushing beneath my mask.

That's when it hit me: Miri and I had never exchanged contact information. She had always changed the subject when I brought it up, and never offered it to me later. A phone would be much easier to use than a cat as a messenger. So why not—?

My psychology class started.

A ridiculous thought crossed my mind: If I studied this subject hard enough, maybe I'd be able to understand her mind.

3

My classes finished around four in the afternoon, and I made my way to the building that housed the clubrooms for the arts. The Drama Club room was easy to find, tucked at the end of the

second-floor hallway. It stood out because pieces of paper were plastered everywhere.

The Drama Club is looking for new members! Spew pools of hot blood on the stage! Die on the stage! Come, you wild warriors, and duel on the battlefield called auditions!

Bold, wild brushstrokes filled entire sheets of printer paper, with flyers running the length of the second-floor hallway. But the disturbing part was that none of them were copies—each one had been written by hand. The sense of madness was palpable.

"I want to join the Going Home Club," I mumbled to myself, completely serious. Of course, no one heard me.

Suddenly, a scream pierced the air.

"AAAHHHHhhhhhh…!"

A wild bellow, like someone in the throes of death, laced with sadness. The door to the Drama Club room flew open.

I stood frozen, mouth agape.

A man covered in blood stumbled out.

Crimson blood poured from a deep wound on his forehead, and he shuffled toward me with a deranged, zombie-like gait.

"Kill, kill, kill, must kill…," he muttered ominously. I tried to blend in to the wall as he staggered past without noticing me.

…This could only mean trouble. Was "spewing pools of hot blood" not a metaphor, after all? I should get out of here while I still could. Just as I was convincing myself to leave, I heard a voice.

"Hey, you! Are you here to join?"

I panicked, standing perfectly still as if pretending to be lifeless would help. A cold sweat ran down my spine. Slowly, fearfully, I turned around.

A shirtless man stood behind me, arms akimbo.

He wore jeans, but his chest was completely bare or, rather, covered in a thick, unbroken carpet of hair that ran down to his navel. It looked like he was wearing a coat of fur.

"You're here to join, right? I can tell by your aura," he said, speaking with the confidence of a psychic.

Before I could respond, he grabbed my arm and pulled me into the room.

The space was about the size of a futsal court, with shelves of props and costumes lining the walls. A screen and projector

rested nearby.

But none of that mattered.

A bloody board lay on the floor.

Anyone who saw a bloodstained board on the floor would find it hard to focus on anything else. The man sat down in a chair behind a plastic partition, stroking his chest hair like someone would stroke their beard. I could only stare, torn between the bloody board and his hairy chest.

“Ah, I haven’t introduced myself yet. I am Shimao Amou, the director of the Drama Club.”

This was the “uniquely charismatic” director Miri had mentioned. And he was certainly…unique.

“Excuse me, but why is there a bloody board on the floor? And why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

“Is it not polite to introduce yourself first?”

“Oh, I’m Youichi Kamisuki.”

“Okay, Kamisuki, you’re up second. Let’s start your audition.”

It seemed he wasn’t planning on answering my questions.

Amou pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket and tossed it to me.

“By the way, do you have any experience onstage?”

“No, none.”

“All right then, you start with fifty Amou points.”

I had no idea what Amou points were, but I opened the paper and froze.

“Do you know where it’s from?” Amou asked.

“It’s Jaques from *As You Like It* by Shakespeare.”

“Would you look at that! You know your stuff! That’s three more Amou points! Now, go for it!”

I took a deep breath and began reciting the lines.

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances—”

The hand stroking the chest hair stopped. I could hardly believe how much I had improved. I remembered all those practice sessions with Miri. Her advice had been spot-on. It felt like she had seen all the ways I could improve and guided me along those paths. I began to feel something like the fate Miri had talked about.

“Well,” Amou said once I finished, sounding impressed. “Are

you sure you've never done this before?"

"Well, I practiced for about a week."

"A week—!" He laughed heartily. "I see. So you had a week! That's minus twenty Amou points!"

"Huh? Why a penalty?"

"If you reach zero Amou points, you pass!"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

So those first three points were actually taking me *away* from passing. Amou was clearly enjoying himself.

"All right, you've got thirty-three points left. Give it your all!"

I was just beginning to despair when the door burst open, and a female student in glasses ran in, screaming.

"We've got a problem. There's a fire!"

4

I rushed after the swift, still-shirtless Amou. The breeze carried a piece of ash toward us, and the acrid smell of smoke filled my nose. Intense flames were shooting up from the eastern side of the club building, blackening the white walls. A crowd had already gathered, and a strange voice cut through the noise.

"Let go of me! Let go!"

The blood-covered man had his hands pinned behind his back, writhing furiously. The sight of him standing before the flames horrified me.

"Hey, Youichi! Youichi, is that you?!"

The guy restraining the blood-covered man called out to me. He was muscular, with short black hair, and looked like he worked out. As I got closer, I realized it was Kentarou Sugai. We had met in April, right before classes went online, and had mostly gotten to know each other through chat rooms. It took me a moment to recognize him, especially with his mask on.

"Youichi, give me a hand!"

I acted on instinct. Together with Sugai, we restrained the blood-covered man. Amou yelled:

"The fire! Put out the fire!"

At his orders, everyone else quickly formed a fire brigade, dousing the flames with water. Two fire extinguishers were

sprayed onto the fire, and finally, it was tamed.

A girl knelt in front of the smoldering embers, blowing away in the white smoke, sobbing. She wore bright, funky clothes—pink-tipped blond hair tucked under a pink cap, and a shirt with a design that looked like a munchkin cat painted by a drunk Picasso.

“Noooo… I worked so hard on these!”

She told us her story: During the lockdown, the scenery and props groups had been hard at work making all the sets and props. They had loaded everything into a rental truck, unloaded it outside the Drama Club room, and turned away for just a second before the fire had started.

“And he’s the one who set it,” Amou said, crossing his arms and motioning toward the blood-covered man.

“Yes, he was crying, staring at the fire, muttering *kill, kill, kill*.”

“It has to be him!” Amou nodded vigorously in agreement.

“No! It wasn’t me!” the blood-covered man declared. “Sure, I wasn’t in my right mind, but I didn’t set the fire!”

“And who’s going to believe you, all covered in blood?!” Amou shouted. Though I wasn’t sure if someone walking around without a shirt was in any position to talk about credibility.

Suddenly, I felt something brush against my feet. Looking down, I saw Saburou. I picked him up and quietly moved into the shadows. Then I looked into his eyes, and—

Miri looked worried.

“What a mess.”

“Everything happened so fast it made my head spin. You knew that would happen, didn’t you?”

“I did. Isn’t Amou so intense? I laugh every time I see him.”

Miri chuckled endearingly. Wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, she added, “Okay then, Yochi, now it’s your turn. You’re going to find the arsonist.”

“What? Me? How am I supposed to do that?”

“Don’t worry; it’s simple. One cute little eyewitness saw it all, you know?”

“A cute eyewitness…? Oh, gotcha.”

I broke the connection for a moment, and Saburou cocked his

head at me. Then I stared into his eyes once more, and—

“I have come to dueeeeeellll!”

A loud voice suddenly fills my ears. Startled, I almost fall off the balcony railing. I hear Amou’s reply through the open window.

“Challenge aaaaaaaaaccepted!”

The door opens with a bang, and a man strides into the room—though, he isn’t covered in blood yet.

“My name is Takeru Samura! I’m a freshman! Amou, I’ve been a fan ever since my first year of high school, when I saw you perform as a third-year student!”

“That’s the spirit!” Amou replied, still wearing a T-shirt. His shirt has the twin field mice, Guri and Gura, on it—a peculiar choice, given his appearance.

“Okay then, let the audition begin!”

Amou sits on a folding chair while Samura stands on the other side of a plastic screen. They both remove their masks.

“Okay, to start, hit me with a Kamehameha.”

“A Ka…a Kamehameha? Like, from *Dragon Ball*?”

Amou nods. Kamehameha…? It’s such a bizarre request that I almost fall over. But somehow Samura understands, responding, “Oh, I see… A Kamehameha… Of course you would…” Then he yells:

“Ka-me-ha-me-haaa!”

He shoots. It’s superb. Had I actually been there, I would have applauded.

But Amou barely reacts, saying:

“Nothing came out.”

“What?”

“The Kamehameha! I didn’t see anything shoot out of your hands!”

Of course, nothing would actually come out. What did he expect?

“I’m so sorry! Please let me try again!”

“HAAAAaaa!” This time, Samura seems to pull energy from the air, screaming:

“KA-ME-HA-ME-HAAAAAAAAAAA!”

It’s incredible. I could almost see the energy shooting out of him.

But Amou stands and tears into him.

“That’s not it at aaaall! Break the plastic screen! Infect me!”

“I… I’m so sorry!”

It’s absurd. Looking annoyed, Amou sits back down and says:

“You gained ten Amou points.”

“What…? Thank…thank you so much…!”

Samura looks happy, but it’s a trap. He’s actually moved further away from his goal. Amou tosses a folded piece of paper toward the now-slightly optimistic Samura. Unfolding it, his eyes widen.

“This…this is a scene from your infamous play, *The Specter of the Furrow*!”

Instructed to perform, Samura checks his surroundings, removes a wooden board from a shelf, takes a deep breath, and begins reciting the lines.

“Oh, but is this what becomes of our fate? Too fragile to stand upon, too strong to break…”

His lamentations express the grief of someone at the mercy of fate. As the scene builds toward a crescendo, he smacks his head with the board. A dull sound rings out, and blood pours from his head. He continues hitting himself, crying as blood covers him.

He seems like the kind of actor who becomes possessed by his roles. It’s impressive, but honestly, a bit much.

“Enough, enough.” Amou cuts the performance short. “You fail.”

“What?” Samura stands unsteadily, staring blankly. “Fail? Wh-why?”

“I saw you perform in high school once.” Amou’s expression remains stern. “You stood onstage, nothing but skin and bones, as if you were starving to death. The impact overwhelmed the judges, and you dominated the national competition. I was surprised to see such dedication from a high school student.”

“Then why…why do I fail?”

“Impressive isn’t the same as good.” Amou speaks coolly. “It’s like being the only person to use a pole in the high jump. Getting depravingly skinny, spewing blood. You used a trick to show you could jump the highest, but you couldn’t get that high without it.

Ultimately, you want others to see you as a good actor, but that's different from wanting to be good. It's a kind of malicious longing. You become obsessed not with touching the audience's souls, but with trampling your rivals onstage. That's an obsession with standing in the limelight, not love. It may look similar, but it isn't. People like that reach a certain level quickly, but they don't progress further. They might become excellent, but never exceptional. You might fool judges at high school plays, but not me."

He then glances to the side and mutters:

"…And you can't even shoot a Kamehameha."

He had spoken so eloquently, but that last part was unnecessary. Samura trembles. And then he breaks. Letting out a wild scream, he picks up the broken board, looking ready to strike.

"What, you want to fight meeeeee?!"

Amou bellows, inexplicably ripping his shirt straight down the middle. Poor Guri and Gura—those wonderful friends—now torn apart as Amou's chest hair explodes forth. He spreads his arms wide, striking a ridiculous yet beautiful pose, like a peacock, his toned body on display in a pointless act of intimidation.

They exchange fiery looks. I swallow hard.

Then, abruptly, Saburou looks away and walks off. How disappointing. What a time for him to lose interest.

Saburou follows his whims, fussing over a swallowtail butterfly as he wanders about.

Eventually, the pile of sets and props appears. They haven't caught fire yet. Up above them, a woman leans out a window, relishing a cigarette. Perhaps out of carelessness, she flicks the butt away without looking.

It lands on an oil painting, and soon the sets are engulfed in flames. Samura watches impassively.

And then the blood-covered man walks up, looking completely out of his mind. Staring into the flames, he mutters "Kill, kill, kill" like a curse, large tears swelling in his eyes and rolling down his cheeks.

5

I broke the connection and sighed. How could I possibly present this evidence to everyone?

“Come on, I’m taking you to the police!” Sugai said, dragging Samura away. Samura resisted, and I knew I had to intervene.

“Wait, he didn’t do it!”

“What did you say?” Sugai scowled. “How do you know that?”

Because I saw it in a cat’s eyes. But I couldn’t tell them that, so I quickly replied, “Think about it logically. It’s obvious.”

“Logically?”

The confusion on Sugai’s face was apparent. He was quite expressive, as expected from a member of the Drama Club. But this wasn’t the time to admire that. I had backed myself into a corner. What should I do? I spoke, racking my brain frantically as I did.

“If he did it, why didn’t he run away after setting the fire?”

“That’s easy.” A man in a French sailor cap with silky blond hair stepped forward. “He’s not right in the head.”

That was a compelling explanation. Everyone stared at me, and I felt myself break out in a cold sweat. But then, like a miracle, I thought of a logical argument that could prove Samura wasn’t the culprit. All I had to do was sell the explanation. The problem wasn’t whether my logic was sound. It was whether I could lead the audience to my desired conclusion.

In other words, I needed to play the role of detective.

I took a deep breath and recalled my practice with Miri. “Step away from yourself,” she had said. Then she popped a large piece of wasabi into her mouth and steadied her expression. “Separate yourself from your emotions and feelings. Most importantly, you need to shift your perspective to how the audience sees you so you can observe yourself from afar.” Only then did tears roll down her cheeks as she stuck out her green tongue. I laughed.

I separated myself from my nervousness, burying it deep inside. I spoke in a way that would engage my audience.

“Let’s start by examining that as a premise.”

“Huh?” The man in the sailor cap tilted his head. “Why?”

“Because that’s the foundation of logical deduction. A therefore B, B therefore C, and so on. By sequentially extrapolating answers from our premise, we can prove something to be fact or fiction.”

I chose some complicated words and spoke with confidence, though I wasn't entirely sure I was using them correctly. The guy in the sailor cap seemed to understand, so I continued.

"Now, the next step is—" I paced like a detective. My practice with Miri had paid off. "If he is the culprit, how did he set the fire?"

"Matches, or a lighter…"

"In other words, he used some sort of tool?"

"Well, he can't make a fire with his bare hands."

"And does he have any such tools on him?"

Sailor Cap acknowledged this and searched Samura from head to toe.

"No. He probably got rid of it."

"That doesn't make sense."

"What?"

"Getting rid of the tool used to light the fire would be a deliberate attempt to conceal his guilt. That contradicts our premise, plus he didn't flee the scene. Therefore, he did not do it."

Sailor Cap was speechless, and Amou stared at me in awe. My heart pounded, not just from nerves but from the joy of acting bubbling up inside me. Samura yelled, tears of relief in his eyes.

"Yes, that's it! I didn't do it!"

"So then, who did?"

Sugai reluctantly released Samura and cocked his head. I felt a presence and looked up. The woman I had seen smoking earlier looked down at me, her mouth agape.

"Oh," she said.

"Oh," I replied.

Everyone else looked up. The girl disappeared. I dashed inside the building, taking the stairs two at a time. A door slammed shut. I headed toward that sound and opened the door.

Three women stood there. Cooking utensils were scattered across the nearest kitchen counter. A plate filled with food rested on a central table. It looked like the Cooking Club. A woman with chestnut brown hair glared at us.

"Hey, what are you doing? You can't just barge in here. And why don't you have a shirt on?"

I noticed Amou standing next to me, followed by other members of the Drama Club. Amou declared, "You there! What

was that ‘Oh’ all about? Nothing could be more suspicious!”

“Oh, no, see, I…”

“That’s suspicious! Do you think subpar acting like that could fool the Drama Club?!”

The woman—the real culprit—was obviously acting suspiciously. If we could find evidence of cigarettes in the room, the case would be watertight. I started sniffing around but could hardly smell anything through the aroma of borscht. Observing the surroundings, I asked, “Why keep the windows closed when it’s so hot in here?”

I approached the woman and stood by the window, which overlooked a busy area filled with pedestrians.

“This table shows no signs of cooking, yet the fan is set to high. Amou, look at this.” I pointed to a little ash that remained on the table and smelled it. “Cigarette ash. I’m certain they closed the windows and turned on the fan to smoke.”

I pressed on, everyone stepping aside as I walked into the hall. I pointed to the windowsill where the woman had been smoking.

“There’s some ash around here, too. Perhaps the room was too hot, and they opened the window on the less-busy side to smoke.”

“How astute! So that’s it! She tossed her cigarette down from up here, and it started the fire. You’re not supposed to smoke anywhere on campus except designated areas!”

Amou glared at the women in the Cooking Club. The culprit blurted out, “Hey, you can’t just make stuff up! None of us were smoking! That ash was there already! It was from whoever used the room before us!”

“Then we’ll search you to make sure you don’t have any cigarettes!”

“Don’t touch me, you weirdo!”

Slap! A bright red handprint marked Amou’s chest.

“Ow! I’m no weirdo!”

Weirdo or not, the scene looked weird. Either way, we were out of luck if they wouldn’t let us search them. I thought for a moment and then examined the sink in front of them.

“What are you doing…?” Amou asked.

“From the way the ash is scattered beneath the fan, there should have been an ashtray. One big enough that they couldn’t hide it on themselves. If they used pots or plates and washed

them, then the vegetable scraps in the sink should have ash on them. And the other sink is bone-dry."

I looked around and transferred some oil from a glass bottle into an empty bowl.

"There's nothing here. A glass ashtray has the same refractive index as oil, so light would pass through it without reflecting, and we wouldn't see anything inside. Another possibility would be—"

I glanced at the soup bowl in front of the culprit, which contained her portion of borscht. The other women's bowls were empty.

"Excuse me."

I picked up a pair of chopsticks and poked a piece of food in the borscht. The woman, the culprit, yelled, "Hey, what the hell are you doing?!"

"It's not cooked all the way through."

"So? What are you, a food critic?!"

"Regardless of whether the stove is still on, it seems odd that this is the only bowl with food. If the borscht isn't done yet, then I have to ask myself: Why—?"

I noticed the woman (the culprit) turn pale. She replied, "I was going to make sure it tasted okay…"

"I think I see some ash in the borscht."

"That's just your imagination."

"Then you won't mind eating some, would you?"

The room went silent. The woman slowly picked up her spoon and brought some borscht up to her mouth—

"Cigarette ash is extremely poisonous, you know," I warned. Her hand froze.

She slowly returned the spoon to the bowl. "What's wrong?" I asked pointedly.

"…I…don't feel like eating right now…"

"I see." Gazing at the women standing rigidly, I said, "Well then, I'll have some."

They exchanged glances for a moment. I took a spoon and the woman grabbed my wrist, stopping me. Then she finally said, "… I'm sorry."

The women hung their heads in dismay.

"Well, it looks like the case is solved," Amou said as we watched Sugai and Sailor Cap lead the female students away.

“That was astonishing, Kamisuki. You really are quite the detective.”

“Well, it’s not like that.” I scratched my head, feeling embarrassed.

“But you were wrong about one thing. Cigarette ash isn’t poisonous.”

“I know.”

Amou’s eyes lit up. “Of course you do!” He bellowed heartily, slapping me on the back. “Just like an actor! I thought it was the blood-covered guy the whole time! And if not him, then I would have thought *that* person had done it!”

“‘That’ person?” I cocked my head. Nearby, the girl in funky clothes who had been crying spoke up.

“Amou… All the sets and everything we worked on have been burned to ash. What do we do now?”

“They’re gone, and we can’t do anything about that. But every cloud has a silver lining. I’ve just thought up a new story! It will usher in a new era of theater!”

He placed a hand on Samura’s shoulder. Something must have changed his mind because he said, “I’m sorry for doubting you. I apologize wholeheartedly. If you’d like, we’d love to have you join the Drama Club.”

“Really?!” Even after everything he had been through, Samura’s eyes shone. “Thank you so much!”

Amou then placed a hand on my shoulder. I flinched.

“And you, of course, passed the audition as well.” He spun around and declared, “Everyone! Our next play is a mystery. And the lead role is a detective!”

A wave of unease washed over me at Amou’s declaration.



* * *

“Kamisuki, you are going to be our next lead!”

6

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

I hung my head, and Miri chuckled.

“Me too. The way things have turned out has been rather unexpected.”

“Unexpected? I thought you could see the future.”

“The future is constantly in flux. Some things will definitely happen, while others occur at random. It branches out indefinitely. And when someone who can see the future interferes with it, the branches multiply exponentially. Even I can’t grasp all of its ins and outs.”

“If that’s the case, are you sure you really can’t see who the killer is?”

“I’m sorry—” Miri shook her head, stroking the earring on her left ear. “I can’t. There are too many branches, and none lead to the killer’s identity. It’s not impossible in theory, but that’s just how it is in practice. It’s basically like trying to find a single needle in a desert.”

“So in other words, it’s up to me to figure this out.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry; all I can do is observe.”

“So what do I do next?”

“First, keep gathering information. Look into the victim, Amagasaki. Ask around and find out what kind of person she was, who her friends were, if she was seeing someone, or if anyone disliked her. Things like that.”

“That’s just what a regular detective would do.”

“And while you’re at it, why not enjoy Drama Club?”

“What?” The unexpected words took me aback.

“I mean, you’re in college, after all. Make some friends; get a girlfriend. Don’t waste your youth.”

Get a girlfriend?

A sudden pain burned through my chest. Then, as if to disguise that pain, I said:

“Ha-ha, why not? I hope I can find a girl I like.”

“What’s your type?”

“A mature woman with a good body.”

I didn’t really mean it. I didn’t have a type.

“Really. So the polar opposite of me.”

Miri’s carefree tone seemed forced.

“I suppose so.”

“……”

The air in the room felt a bit off.

“Well, I should go to bed. Good luck with Drama Club. Yochi, you’re going to make a really good detective.”

“Oh, sure. Good night.”

And just like that, the connection cut out. I covered my face and let out a frustrated yell.

Saburou put his paw on my knee.

7

A strange piece of paper hung on the Drama Club room door.

The Devil’s Troupe.

The words had been written in eerie brushstrokes. I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a Black Mass happening in there. Today was my first day in the club, but I already wanted to go home.

I stood there for a moment, braced—or rather, resigned—myself, and pulled open the door.

A zombie stared out at me.

Some poorly nourished college students can look like zombies, but what stood before me was undoubtedly a zombie. Its skin hung rotted and decayed, and a putrid left eye dangled from its socket.

I wordlessly closed the door. Just then the zombie yanked open the door, and I screamed.

“Ha-ha-ha! You scream like a girl!”

It doubled over with laughter. Howls erupted from inside the room. I was stupefied, then said, “Oh, Sugai, it’s you! What is that, some kind of special makeup?”

“Ha-ha, sorry!” The girl in funky clothes who had been crying yesterday brought her hands together in apology. “This is one of

my best creations, and I was just having a little fun! It's such a cute little zombie, don't you think?!"

She reached up and pulled at the zombie's cheek.

"Ow! Hiyama, that hurts…!"

Sugai protested, but he looked pleased. The skin lifted, revealing it was something like a mask.

"Wow, that's really good," I said, impressed.

Hiyama happily showed me her Instagram and TikTok, featuring photos detailing the makeup process and short videos of Sugai becoming a zombie and dancing to Michael Jackson's "Thriller." I pointed at the screen.

"Is your account name by any chance your first name? *Ume* like *umeboshi* and *ko* like the character for 'child'?"

"Ah! You guessed it! It's such an old-fashioned name! It's so embarrassing!"

If this were a manga, the artists would have drawn big Xs over her eyes. Sugai immediately jumped in, "Not at all! Umeko's a lovely name!"

"Yeah, you really think so…?"

Her eyebrows knitted together, but she was smiling. It didn't take much to win her over.

Soon, about ten people had gathered around me.

"You're Youichi Kamisuki, right?"

"You were an amazing detective!"

"You looked so natural; do you do that sort of thing often?"

A barrage of questions assaulted me. I was so used to social distancing that this was making me dizzy. So many people introduced themselves all at once, but everyone was wearing a mask, so I honestly didn't remember them all that well. I answered each person's questions while trying to gather information. There were about twenty-three people in the Drama Club.

Then there was a knock on the door.

"The second newbie is coming!"

Sugai the zombie dashed over to his standby position. The door opened, and Samura appeared, a gigantic Band-Aid stuck to his forehead. He let out a strange scream that sounded like "Hygaahh!" and collapsed, eliciting raucous laughter from the group.

8

“Well, you all seem to be enjoying yourselves. But don’t forget about COVID precautions,” Amou said as he walked in. Samura’s eyes lit up, and he tried unsuccessfully to stand up from where he had collapsed on the floor.

We all gathered around Amou as he counted us and announced, “Everyone is supposed to be here today. We have some new members, so we’re going to do some workshopping.”

We made sure the air was circulating in the room, spread out, and started stretching and doing vocal warm-ups. I tried to relax my body and project from my abdomen like Miri had shown me. Glancing to the side, I saw Umeko practicing, too. Even nonactors were participating. Once we finished, everyone had fifteen seconds to introduce themselves.

We followed that with a simple game called Tasty Curry. Everyone received an ingredient card, and we had a set number of questions to guess one another’s ingredients. Then we’d form teams to try to create a tasty bowl of curry within the time limit. But we couldn’t say what ingredient we were or the name of the curry we wanted to make—it was all about communication practice.

I drew sea cucumber, a traitor card. People who drew traitor cards were trying to change a delicious curry into a disastrous one. I insisted that I was “meaty and juicy” and miraculously transformed a beef curry into a sea cucumber curry, which cracked everyone up.

“All right, now that we’re all warmed up, it’s time to move to études,” Amou declared. I was thoroughly confused, but Sugai came to my rescue.

“Improv. We make groups and improvise a scene around a certain topic.”

“Gotcha. By the way, Sugai, what made you join the Drama Club?”

“I was in the Drama Club in high school. I knew Amou from there and joined this club soon after starting college.”

“Wow, you’re proactive.”

He seemed different from the negative Sugai I knew from the

chat screen. Quarantine might have made him more pessimistic, too.

We drew lots to form groups of five. Sugai, Umeko, and I ended up in the same group. The other two looked familiar as well. One of them was the girl who had burst into the room during my audition and told us about the fire. With round silver-framed glasses and braided pigtails, she looked like a stereotypical bookworm. Quiet and slouching, she wasn't very assertive—she had to be the script manager or something like that. Her name was Miwako Hirutani.

The other person was the guy from the fire wearing the sailor cap. In addition to his silky blond hair, he wore a polo shirt with a famous brand logo, chino pants, and the same sailor cap, even though we were inside. His hair was cropped short at the back, exposing his milk white skin. He stylishly wore a leather bracelet next to his watch and gave off feminine vibes. His name was Minato Isemi.

The topic for our scene was "a conversation while everyone is seated." Two groups went before us. The first one did "students skipping swim class," adding a fun, comedic touch, while the second group did "driving somewhere in a car," a mystery that made my palms sweat. They were all so good; it hardly seemed unscripted.

Suddenly, Isemi whispered into my ear, "Hey, how does it feel to nab the lead even though you don't deserve it?"

The way he said it was nasty. I couldn't wrap my head around this sudden malice and replied, "Well, it does make me pretty nervous."

I sounded like a local resident being interviewed on the news after a neighborhood incident.

"So then, why not save face and resign? Or are you too shameless?"

His tone was polite enough, but his words dripped with venom. Finally a little ticked off, I replied, "Maybe you wanted the lead. Is that it?"

Isemi tsked. Then it was time for our group to perform.

As I stood up, Isemi whispered, "I'm going to teach you a lesson—!"

We sat around a table with a tablecloth spread out on top of it

so our legs weren't visible. We had to use this set in our scene.

"Excuse me—" Isemi raised his hand. I had a bad feeling about this. "Kamisuki and I are going to play a little game. We're going to play 'the characters die off one by one,' and in our game, the first one of us to die loses. The loser buys juice for everyone."

The entire room turned to look at me. Isemi grinned. I felt like backing out would play directly into his hands. Well then, I'd just have to show him.

"Sure, let's do it."

Everyone cheered, chanting "Juice! Juice! Juice!" in a big chorus. Isemi glared daggers at me.

For no reason at all, Amou took off his T-shirt and yelled vigorously.

"Let the ferocious stage battle begin!"

9

Silence engulfed the room.

The first person to speak surprised me: It was Hirutani. Her breathing was rough, and she shook in her chair.

"I can't move… Where are we?!"

Everyone else started rattling their chairs, so I followed along. As we constructed the scene, we realized that we had all lost our memories—and our hands and feet were tightly bound. We began discussing how to escape. Apparently, we had just woken up from suspended animation and were suffering from temporary memory loss. I threw up a greenish-yellow phlegm brought on by suspended animation sickness.

Now we had to start playing "the characters die off one by one." Just as I was wondering how it would go, Umeko moved.

"Wait. I feel something!"

Then she looked around. Sugai caught it and immediately started acting like something was assaulting him before emitting a final death cry and sliding below the table. Hirutani screamed hysterically. The audience swallowed hard.

Tension filled the air for a moment.

Wearing the zombie mask, Sugai pulled back the cloth

covering the table and flashed his face.

The audience reacted with a mix of amusement and fright. I barely kept my smile in check. This was fun. Sugai was the judge now. Anyone who was about to die, according to the scene, would be eaten by a zombie.

That's when Isemi spoke, his words loaded.

"Ooohh…my head… I've seen this before…"

Oh, those lines could lead just about anywhere. Sure enough, we were in a biological testing facility, subjects in an experiment to endow people with supernatural abilities. But the experiments had failed, giving birth to an unknown virus that turned people into zombies. Isemi had worked it so he possessed the power to tell the future.

"I can see the future… Hiyama, you're going to die in ten seconds."

Just as he said that, the zombie attacked Umeko. Isemi smiled at me, letting me know that I was next. This was bad. If I didn't do something, he would win it all.

"I can see more… Kamisuki, ten seconds from now your insides are going to explode, and you will die."

Oh no. I started to count down from ten in my head.

Ten… Nine… Eight… Seven…

With three seconds left, I blurted out, "I can see the future, too! I'm not going to die!"

Zero.

I didn't die. Without relaxing for a second, I fleshed out the situation.

"I'm a psychic, too. The future is constantly in flux. Fate can change."

That elicited cheers and a round of applause. I had somehow deprived Isemi of his claim to dominance. We kept our little battle going. Hirutani died in the process, leaving just the two of us.

"Kamisuki, I feel a strong connection with you," he said without any conviction. "If you were here with me, I would give anything to help you…"

If you were here with me? Before I could grasp what he meant, Isemi threw me a curveball. We hadn't been in the same room the whole time but were talking to each other from different

rooms via a monitor.

This spelled trouble. Isemi was in control. I didn't know what he had in mind, but I had to stop him!

Right after thinking that, though, he began speaking.

"I've just realized it now. Nothing is showing up on my monitor. I've been looking into the future and talking to you there, in the future. Kamisuki, you're watching a recording."

I immediately understood what he was trying to do. Because it was pretty much exactly the same kind of relationship that Miri and I shared. The audience seemed puzzled, so Isemi explained the situation carefully.

They all gasped together in excitement. Honestly, nothing could be better for him. Having himself exist in the past negated my power to see the future, allowing him to attack me with his unchallenged psychic ability. Isemi proudly explained the situation.

"I remember everything. This is a fallout shelter. The five of us came here to escape a zombie-infested world. You all slept for three hundred years, but I alone woke up after two hundred. To see what the outside world was like. However, I was still groggy from the suspended animation, and I started to talk with all of you in the future. The AI still worked at the time, recording this message automatically, which is how this miraculous conversation is happening…"

I have to admit, Isemi was really quick on his feet. The audience was completely hooked.

"I'm so sorry, Kamisuki, but you only have three minutes to live…"

Damn! My heart raced. If I didn't take action, then I'd lose. I had to think of something. Think, think… The audience began chanting, "Juice! Juice! Juice!" They were so loud.

I got it! If this was a recording, then I could fast-forward it! Wait, my hands and feet were bound, so I couldn't operate the controls. Of course, AI voice recognition! No, Isemi had said that it was working only during his time. Damn, he had shut off every avenue of escape! I only had two minutes left—!

A sudden jolt of electricity coursed through my brain.

"You said this is a shelter. So no one except the five of us could have gotten in, right?"

“That’s right. The walls are solid steel.”

I chuckled quietly, then said, “So who attacked Sugai?”

Someone cried out in surprise. Isemi looked stunned. I kept going.

“One of the five cryogenic sleep chambers on my monitor is broken. Yours. My monitor says that the world outside the shelter is still infested with zombies. This means that one hundred years ago, in your time, it was also infested with zombies. You couldn’t go outside, you couldn’t reenter suspended animation, and all your companions one hundred years later are dead… It filled you with despair. So you killed yourself—then became a zombie and attacked Sugai.”

Isemi looked possessed. He grew redder and redder, shaking in his seat. One minute remained on the countdown. He spoke as if the words were being squeezed from him.

“That’s right. I can only already be dead. The time release on my post-suspension safety equipment had been set off, and the restraints had been released. So then, your restraints, too.” He desperately added, “You can change the future!”

Then he held a gun to his head, pulled the trigger, and disappeared under the table. The next second, I was attacked by a zombie. I screamed as I tried to fight off the zombie.

“There’s a gun in the zombie’s coat pocket! Thank you, friend!”

I fired into the zombie’s skull. I peeled away the mask of the limp zombie, revealing Isemi’s dead face. He had quickly swapped with Sugai under the table. I finished the scene, tears running down my face.

“I lost all my friends to the past! But the future is still not lost! I’m going to sleep for another thousand years. Then I’ll start a new life with all of you reborn into a new civilization—”

I scanned the audience. Everyone’s mouths hung half-open, touched. I trembled. I was enjoying this. Acting was really fun!

I reentered suspended animation. Thunderous applause rang out.

The five of us lined up and bowed to the applause. Isemi whispered in my ear, “Do you have a favorite juice?”

“I like strawberry milk.”

Isemi chuckled and said that he’d buy me three.

10

After the études, we left the building, got drinks from a vending machine, and enjoyed them. Isemi paid for everything, of course, cheerful the whole time.

Drinking the most expensive energy drink the machine sold, Sugai remarked, “Isemi is super rich. He can afford it.”

He did look like he had money.

Suddenly, a man with stubble appeared, black coffee in one hand, and said, “That étude was superb.”

He had arrived late and watched the performances from the corner of the room. Sugai helped me out.

“This is Shinobu Kuroyama, a senior. He’s above Amou and is a stage manager. He’s a talented man, acting and directing in other theater companies.”

The stage manager leads the staff and is responsible for everything coming together to make a play happen. The director is responsible for bringing the play to life and guiding the actors, similar to a movie director or orchestra conductor.

“Don’t oversell me. I was a bit worried when Amou handed the lead to an amateur, but that wasn’t bad. I think you have a lot of empathy.”

“Empathy?”

“Yes. It’s crucial. You mix another person’s emotions and lines with your own and then blend that with the other actors onstage.”

I had never considered myself particularly empathetic. But I could think of one thing: When I look into another person’s eyes, I relive their memories and feelings, and becoming that person again and again probably made me more empathetic.

Kuroyama said he was excited for the play and then walked away.

We gathered back in the room. The piece of paper with ***The Devil’s Troupe*** on it was gone.

“Now we’re going to watch a video of last summer’s performance of *The Specter of the Furrow*,” Amou announced, and Samura suddenly became extremely animated.

“The legendary play! Kamisuki, keep your eyes peeled and pay close attention as you watch! It has everything you need to understand what theater truly is!”

“If I peel my eyes, I won’t be able to see anything…,” I joked, but Samura didn’t react at all.

“He’s a zealot! A total fanatic!” Sugai joked with amusement.

Someone pulled the blackout curtains over the open windows, and the movie began to project on the screen.

The Specter of the Furrow was based on the life of the eighteenth-century French diplomat and spy Chevalier d’Éon de Beaumont. A member of Louis XV’s personal spy network, the *Secret du Roi*, d’Éon departs for St. Petersburg in July 1775 to revive relations with Russia. Along the way, he encounters a ghost on the road, standing in the furrow made by horse-drawn carriages. The ghost possesses d’Éon, and his mental health begins to deteriorate.

After arriving in Russia, d’Éon infiltrates the court of Empress Elizabeth, sometimes disguising himself as a handsome young knight, and other times as a beautiful maid of honor who reads to her. He successfully achieves his goal in this remarkable fashion. The two fall deeply in love, but after a conspiracy, they turn on each other, each plotting to kill the other. Eventually, Elizabeth passes away, and d’Éon returns to France in deep despair. He later becomes a dragoon captain and fights valiantly in the Seven Years’ War. In his later years, he lives as a woman, earning a living by dueling in a dress.

The play was a whirlwind of twists and turns, blending mystery and philosophical themes, while the ghost added a kaleidoscopic, almost geometric layer to the story.

When the heroine, Elizabeth, appeared on-screen, the atmosphere in the room shifted, as if I could smell incense burned in offering to the dead. Someone wept softly—Karin Amagasaki had appeared. Dressed in a queen’s robe, she looked as beautiful as a peacock, yet she embodied the innocence and whims of a young girl. She masterfully portrayed the duality of those in power.

I felt Karin’s mother’s presence stirring within me, and a wave of nostalgic sadness washed over me like a warm sea. I realized that the other members of the Drama Club were immersed in

those same shallow waters. It finally dawned on me that everyone had been trying to keep up appearances, but this club had clearly lost one of its members.

The performance continued to captivate me.

Amou played Louis XV. He was both director and actor, and his onstage presence was far more technical than I had imagined. He portrayed the King of France, the slightly childish Bien-Aimé, with multiple lovers, while restraining his personal quirks. Isemi played Louis XVI, and though he wasn't bad, he couldn't match Amou's skill.

At first, I couldn't recognize the striking young woman playing Marie-Antoinette. To my surprise, it was Hirutani. Onstage, she had transformed into an entirely different person. It was as if another spirit had taken over her. She effortlessly shifted from a playful, unpretentious woman dressing d'Éon in gowns to a figure of horror, wearing a ghostly expression as she was escorted to the guillotine during the French Revolution.

But throughout the play, from beginning to end, the actress playing Chevalier d'Éon stole my admiration.

She was unbelievably beautiful, but beyond that, her acting was breathtaking. D'Éon's character needed to balance both male and female identities, making the role incredibly difficult to perform. Yet she masterfully played both parts, tying back her soft black hair as a man, and letting it flow loose as a woman. As a man, she embodied chivalry; as a woman, she exuded charm. There was a mystery about her that transcended the clothes, giving her an irresistible appeal. I couldn't comprehend how she managed to be both enigmatic and vibrant. Without a doubt, d'Éon had come alive on that stage.

The play began to deviate from actual history, blending fact and fiction seamlessly. Wounded in battle, d'Éon succumbed to a fever, and the ghost heightened this feverish effect. Then the scene from Samura's audition appeared: d'Éon, striking his head with his unfinished autobiography, lamented:

"Oh, is this what becomes of our fate? Too fragile to stand upon, too strong to break."

The difference between Samura's audition and the real performance sent chills down my spine. The heartbreak in the scene made my chest tighten and brought tears to my eyes.

Samura had simply hit his head, but a real actor strikes at the heart.

As the ghost's identity was revealed, the play raced toward its climactic mystery. D'Éon, on the verge of death from his fever, became a solitary bird, returning to his most joyous memories. He flew to a windowsill, reading aloud to Empress Elizabeth. The soft sunlight streamed through the window, and time seemed to stretch toward infinity. D'Éon read from his unpublished autobiography, and upon finishing the last page, Elizabeth asked:

"And so, in the end, who was this person that I loved?"

"Who indeed? I wonder. Who indeed…"

Tears rolled from her innocent eyes.

Then Elizabeth said softly, "And yet, my love was true."

With that, the bird flew away from the windowsill.

I couldn't believe how much I was crying. The curtain fell, the actors came out for their curtain call, and the emotion reached its peak. Karin Amagasaki, Marie-Antoinette, d'Éon—they all joined hands, waving and smiling brightly. It felt as though everything, even this final moment, was part of the play itself. I was reminded of a line from Shakespeare: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." It wasn't just me—everyone was crying. I was devastated, completely overwhelmed. Like Samura had said, it demonstrated the power of the stage in one fell swoop.

We wrapped up, and I stepped outside into the summer night. The familiar scent of summer greeted me—a summer tinged with blood. There was an unusual energy in the air that made us all feel restless and excited. Samura suddenly screamed wildly and ran off at full speed. He didn't come back, and we had no idea what was going on, which made us laugh even more. I felt dizzy, but despite everything, I hadn't forgotten my mission. Still, a pure desire to perform had taken over. I wanted to start rehearsing as soon as possible.

That's when I noticed someone sitting on a bench under a streetlight. The shadow of her sleek high-heeled shoes zigzagged across the pavement. She stood and walked toward me with graceful movements.

I gulped. Chevalier d'Éon had stepped out of the play and stood right before me.

"Good evening," she said, her voice captivating as she lowered her mask slightly, revealing a smile on her painted lips. She was chillingly gorgeous. Her short, shapely hair framed her small face, and she looked effortlessly cool in a slender, monochrome outfit with a jacket casually draped over her shoulder. Her earrings—two in her right ear, three in her left—glimmered in the light.

I felt uneasy and flustered. Without lowering my mask or composing myself, I nodded and replied, "Hello."

"I wish I could have made it to rehearsal today. I at least wanted to introduce myself. I'm Chitose Sakuraba. It's nice to meet you."

I introduced myself in return, and Sakuraba extended her right hand. I wiped mine nervously before shaking hers. Her hand was much smaller than I had expected—it had seemed larger onstage. While we shook hands, she tilted her head slightly and asked:

"Were you crying?"

"Huh? Well." I hurriedly wiped away my tears with my sleeve. "We just watched *The Specter of the Furrow*. It was stunning. Your performance was incredible."

"Heh-heh." She smiled, her eyes softening as they glistened with emotion. "Thank you. Amou sent me a video of your étude earlier. The sci-fi zombie one."

"Wait, he recorded that? How embarrassing…"

"Don't be. You were good. Really. You're quite talented. And the way you handled the fire, that was impressive."

"Thank you. So you were there, too."

I felt myself blush, hoping the darkness and my mask would hide it.

"I'll see you later, detective," she said with a teasing charm before walking toward the other women.

It was only then that I noticed how fiercely my heart was pounding.

11

“It’s been about a week since you joined the Drama Club,” Miri said after we finished practice.

“Really? That long already?” I was surprised. It felt more like three days had passed. When remote classes started, time seemed to drag endlessly, but now, the days flew by incredibly fast. I’d go to class, rehearse at Drama Club, then go home and practice with Miri. It was a lot of practice, but it never felt exhausting. The better I got, the more fun it became.

“Yochi, I’m so happy you’re starting to enjoy acting,” Miri said, smiling warmly.

“It’s fun now, but I know Amou is going to start demanding more and more. He’s going to get really strict. And apparently, there’s something called Hell Camp during summer break—”

“Oh yes, when you go to Tokushima. The main cast takes a boat to Amou’s parents’ island, and everyone stays in a building called the Goddess House. Every day is filled with grueling practice.”

“An island? Is he really that rich?”

“Apparently, he’s a descendant of Emperor Kanmu, and his family has a long and distinguished pedigree. They’ve owned that island for generations. His grandfather was a famous actor, and he’s the one who built the Goddess House.”

“It’s called Hell, though. That sounds kind of scary.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll have to cancel it this year.”

“What? Why?”

“A typhoon is going to hit that day, and no one will be able to get to the island. But you’ll all still go to the port and debate whether to go until the last minute. In the end, you’ll eat at Amou’s parents’ house, and that will be it.”

“Well, that’s a relief, but I’m honestly a little disappointed.”

“You’ve grown confident all of a sudden,” Miri said with amusement. “How’s the investigation going?”

“I’m on it, of course. Let me tell you what I’ve found so far.”

I opened the case file on my laptop, showing a mind map of all twenty-three club members and their connections.

“As you’d expect, the club is divided into several close-knit groups, especially among the women.”

“Naturally, women tend to form groups.” Miri nodded. “What group was Amagasaki in?”

“She didn’t belong to any one group in particular. Her best friend seems to be Ishikawa, who runs the lights, but I haven’t met her yet.”

“So Amagasaki was an outcast?”

“More like a loner. She was popular, good-looking, and the female lead. She seemed to get along better with men than women.”

“How about her love life?”

“She was popular with the guys and got asked out a lot. But no one’s mentioned a boyfriend yet.”

“Did anyone hate her?”

“I wouldn’t say hate, but she and Miwako Hirutani had a falling out once. Hirutani is obsessed with theater, and she’s upset that Amagasaki got the role of Elizabeth. She’s been bitter about it ever since. They say she would run to the bathroom to cry.”

“So some people envied her. But that’s not much of a motive.”

So far, there hadn’t been any significant clues.

After I finished my report, we sat down to watch a movie. Miri took a Blu-ray disc titled *Stake* from the shelf.

“This one’s excellent! It’s a zombie movie, but the writing is really good. The acting is superb, and I think you’ll learn a lot from it!”

“Okay, let’s watch it.”

Miri turned off the lights and sat down on the sofa. Her Saburou curled up next to her.

The movie began with a family checking into a hotel. The family was dysfunctional and awkward around one another. The main character, an author, kept taking psychiatric drugs while losing himself in his writing—until he suddenly noticed something wasn’t right. For some reason, the hotel was completely run-down. Grabbing a flashlight, he hesitantly began to look around, only to encounter a zombie.



Saburou stood slowly and sat on Miri's lap. I involuntarily gasped. Through his fluffy fur, I felt the warmth of Miri's lap. She began stroking the back of his neck, and it tickled so much I thought I was going to die.

"Hey, Miri, stop! Stop!"

Unfortunately, she didn't hear me. She was completely absorbed in the movie, unaware of anything else. Bright red with embarrassment, I tried my best to concentrate on the film.

It's eventually revealed that the main character is schizophrenic. His work and reality start blending together, and he can no longer tell fiction from reality. He begins questioning everything—who he really is, whether his wife and daughter are real, and if the zombies are actually zombies.

Eventually, he finds his wife, and they plot their escape. As they reminisce about their past, something feels off. His wife's memories don't quite align with his. She insists they never had a daughter.

Gripped by pure terror, his hallucinations worsen. In the climax, his zombified wife attacks him, and he drives a stake into her face, repeatedly hammering it with a rock. But even in that moment, he's not entirely sure if she's really a zombie or not. The intensity of the scene made my skin crawl. The actor's performance was incredible. The wife's eyes looked utterly lifeless—how in the world did she manage to extinguish the light in her eyes like that?

My heart skipped a beat when Miri suddenly hugged Saburou tightly.

"Miri?"

But of course, she didn't hear me. I could feel her warmth and the slight tremble in her body. That's when it finally dawned on me. She wasn't good with horror movies. I had to smile. She'd chosen this movie because my étude was a zombie sci-fi, hoping it might be useful for me.

"We could've watched something you wanted to watch."

On the screen, the main character was now pursued by zombies. He pressed his back against a door, then drove a stake through his leg, using the pain to dispel his hallucinations. "Go away," he chanted, "go away, go away!"

Suddenly, he realized that everything had gone silent. The

hotel was empty. When he went to check on his wife's body, he found the remains of a crow—with a stake driven through it.

He walked outside, greeted by a surreal, dreamlike scene. Dead bodies lay scattered around a garden filled with white roses in full bloom. Countless butterflies fluttered, dancing in the midday sun. A girl in a blue dress stood there, her back to him—like Alice in Wonderland.

I swallowed hard.

In a whisper, he called his daughter's name.

After a moment—a painfully long one—the girl slowly turned to face him. Then, without warning, she lunged at her father's heart.

The movie never showed the girl's face, only a close-up of the father's. His facial expressions transitioned masterfully, capturing every nuance of his emotions: doubt, vague expectation, joy, tears, realization, suffering, sorrow, resignation—and finally, only love remained. Then the movie ended. Those expressions seared themselves into my memory, lingering faintly over the black screen as the credits rolled.

Through the somber music, I heard Miri crying. I could feel her quiet sobs and the slight tremble of her body. It felt like hearing Miri's soul. Like holding a seashell to my ear and listening to the echo of a phantom sea.

When the credits finished, Miri gently lifted Saburou off her lap and turned on the lights.

She asked, "What did you think?"

Her eyes still glistened with tears, but I didn't mention them. I answered with conviction, "That was amazing! I was blown away!"

We got lost in conversation about the movie, dissecting every detail. Before we knew it, hours had passed.

Saburou eventually yawned. Just as I was thinking how funny it is when cats yawn, it infected me, and I yawned, too. Then it spread to Miri, who let out an adorable little yawn, and soon enough, Saburou yawned again. We doubled over laughing, tears streaming down our cheeks from the sheer absurdity of it all.

"Oh, how funny," Miri said, wiping away a tear with her finger. "It's late for both of us. We should head to bed soon." She gently patted Saburou's head, and I blushed slightly again.

“Good night, Miri.”

“Good night, Yochi.”

Then we cut the connection.

The room was left with just one person and one cat.

Like closing the lid of a music box, the sounds and colors of the evening slowly drifted away into the distance.

I felt a wave of sadness. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I could always be with Miri?

I went to lie down in bed without taking my anxiety meds. I wanted tomorrow to come as soon as possible, just to see her again. That thought circled in my mind as it became fuzzier and fuzzier.

I think I might be falling for Miri.

12

There was another piece of paper on the Drama Club door today.

For God Does See Thee

The font looked ominous, with an eye included on the page for good measure. It was in pretty poor taste, even as a joke. I instinctively checked my surroundings, but no one was there. I shrugged and walked in.

After some basic warm-ups, we started more études. I was grouped with Amou, Kuroyama, and Sakuraba, and I felt nervous being with such virtuosos.

That’s when I noticed a woman I hadn’t seen before in our group.

“That’s the illustrious Wakana Ishikawa,” Sakuraba said, noticing my curiosity.

“I’ve never met her before.”

“Tech members can join cast practice whenever they want. It’s rare for them to be around as much as Umeko, though. Ishikawa’s really shy, so it’s unusual to see her here.”

“So the club members I haven’t met yet are all tech members like sound or scenery?”

“That and the people who never show up, of course,” Sakuraba added with a chuckle. “It’ll be like this until Amou finishes the next script. Just some playful exercises with a mix of cast and

tech.”

“Speaking of Amou, what’s he doing over there?”

I glanced toward the corner of the room. Amou had his arms spread wide, gazing up at the ceiling, looking like the cover of *The Shawshank Redemption*.

“He’s apparently downloading the script from the universe.”

“I wonder what network he’s using.”

“He won’t be much use while he’s like that. It’s best to be prepared.”

The theme for the études was “a facility.” Kuroyama returned just before it was our turn.

“I can’t think without a cigarette first.”

Maybe it was the nicotine, but Kuroyama was sharp. He devised a natural, memorable scene, weaving in plot twists and leading it to a satisfying conclusion. His charisma was complemented by a face that slightly resembled Jesus’s. On the other hand, Amou was practically useless. He sat there blankly, muttering things like “Ahhh” and “Ummm.” We had no choice but to cast him as an old man in a retirement home.

Sakuraba played a visitor to the retirement home, looking striking in her high heels. Kuroyama welcomed her as the manager, offering English tea and madeleines.

“And what brings you here today?” he asked.

Then it happened. For the first time, I saw someone “wear a mystery.” As Sakuraba dipped the imaginary madeleine into imaginary tea, a mysterious smile formed at the corner of her lips. She wore the mystery like a golden shawl, draped elegantly around her shoulders, like something out of a Klimt painting. She ate the madeleine with the slightest emotional nuances, captivating us with the shadow of that scene.

She spoke, and the story progressed.

The scene felt like something out of Japan’s most famous anti-mysteries and was set during the Great Hanshin earthquake of 1995. The group advanced the story with a brazen intensity, as if uncovering a grave. Ishikawa and I played minor roles, barely able to keep up. In the final scene, Amou suddenly snapped out of his haze, delivering a vibrant performance. He threw in two plot twists, and after inexplicably going half naked, the étude ended with an emotional, lyrical touch.

As the applause died down, Amou bolted upright.

“I haaaaaaave iiiiiiiit!!”

He dashed out of the room at full speed, presumably to write down the script. Everyone was used to his eccentric behavior, so the next group casually began preparing.

“When you were eating those madeleines,” I whispered to Sakuraba, “how in the world did you wear the mystery like that?”

“‘Wear the mystery,’ what a lovely expression.” She looked surprised for a moment, then chuckled. “Do you know Sayoko Yamaguchi?”

“Sayoko Yamaguchi?”

“She’s a legendary supermodel. She calls herself ‘someone who wears things.’ As in, she can wear anything. Music, images, the sky, airplane trails, even empty soda cans. Maybe she wears her soul, too, and her body is just an outfit for it. Have you ever paid attention to the audience’s faces while acting?”

I shook my head. I could barely focus on anything but acting.

“If you’re acting really well, you can feel the audience’s souls being drawn out through their eyes, leaving their clay bodies and glass eyeballs in the seats. When that happens, their souls go here.” She tapped the nape of her neck with her finger.

“When you carry the audience’s souls, they’re heavy. So heavy that you get tired and want to pass them on to someone else. You start speeding up, and your movements get sloppy. But if you endure, you’ll wear the audience’s souls. Then you’ll wear the story and, eventually, the mystery itself.”

Her smile spread as she spoke, and her midnight-black pupils seemed ready to draw me in.

The next group began their performance, but I was lost in thought, replaying what Sakuraba had just said.

After practice, I casually approached Ishikawa.

“That étude was really interesting.”

“Huh? Oh, um… Sure,” she replied hesitantly. She really was shy.

“I could barely keep up. It feels like the more I practice, the bigger the gap between me and the others grows.”

“Well… They’re really…really good…”

“They are. And that other person was really good, too. The one who played Elizabeth…”

The moment I mentioned Elizabeth, Ishikawa's face went pale. I realized I'd said too much, but it was too late. Fear flickered across her face.

"Sorry, I have to use the restroom," she muttered, quickly walking away.

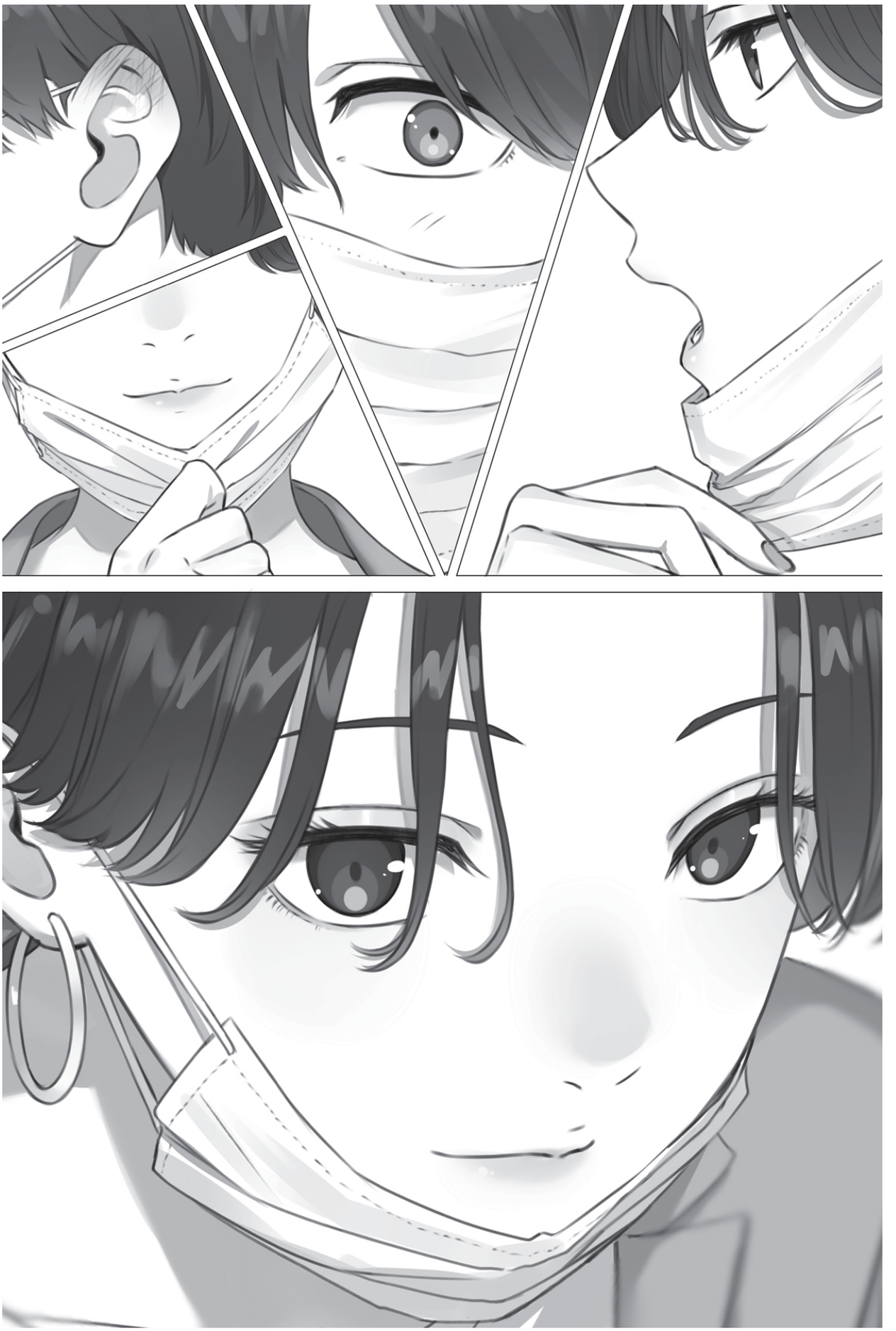
I rubbed my face with my left hand, regretting my words. Behind me, I heard a stifled laugh.

"She blew you off," Sakuraba teased, smiling wickedly.

"That's not what that was about."

"Heh-heh… Sure, of course. You're in love with a girl who's too far away to be with."

"Huh?"



I was stunned. Sakuraba slid up to me, whispering in my ear.

“You’re asking around about Karin Amagasaki, right?”

She pulled back, her pitch-black eyes meeting mine, full of intrigue. My own eyes quivered, helpless.

Leaning in again, she whispered, “Why don’t you and I hang out tomorrow?”

Then she left, leaving my heart pounding wildly.

The scent of her cherry blossom perfume lingered through my mask.

13

The next day, a Saturday, I arrived at Shinjuku Station at ten AM.

Exiting from the west ticket gates, I stopped dead in my tracks. A giant eye stared at me. It was a sculpture called the Eye of Shinjuku. The words on the piece of paper ran through the back of my mind.

For God Does See Thee

I shook my head and kept walking.

Café Degas—the building was gorgeous, with Buff Beauty roses blooming against its antique brick exterior. Dark-green tables dotted the open terrace, with white parasols complementing the bright, sunny sky, invoking a scene straight out of southern France. Beneath one of the parasols, Sakuraba sat sipping iced coffee. She wasn’t wearing her usual monotone outfit today. Instead, she had on a blue cut-and-sew shirt with a white pleated skirt, making for a picturesque scene.

“You’re late,” she said with a refreshing smile, waving. “I’ve been waiting for twenty minutes.”

“Sorry, these streets are like a maze,” I replied, sitting down. We chatted for a while before a waitress approached, bowed politely, and set down an iced coffee. I noticed that the ice in Sakuraba’s drink had hardly melted, while mine was still fresh.

“Did you order for me, too?” I asked.

“Something like that,” she answered vaguely. “But let’s get to the point. Why are you asking around about Amagasaki?”

My throat went dry. I gulped down some iced coffee before

answering. “Well, to tell the truth, I’m the one who found her body.”

I explained what had happened that day, omitting anything about my abilities or Miri. I fabricated a few details, adding psychological motivations to explain why I was searching for the killer.

“I see.” She stirred her coffee, the ice rattling. “I’m not sure how I feel about just anyone stumbling around like that, but I understand why you’re doing it.”

This seemed like my chance.

“Sakuraba, do you think you could help me with my investigation?”

“Help you?”

“You know everyone in the Drama Club, and it would be easier for you to talk to the female members. It would really help me make some progress.”

She stared at a wet mark on the concrete, the golden hoops in her ears catching the summer light. Finally, she looked up, her engrossed eyes locking with mine.

“Sure.”

“Really?!”

“But I have two conditions.” She raised her finger. “First, you have to prove your deductive skills. Right here, right now. I don’t like wasting my time, so I won’t participate in anything that has no chance of succeeding.”

“Prove it? How exactly do you expect me to do that?”

She placed her right hand on the clipboard lying on the table.

“The rules are simple. All you have to do is figure out the total on the bill.”

“Really? That’s it? Are you sure?”

I started to stand, but she stepped on my foot.

“However, you can’t move from this spot. No questions and no talking.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

I quickly surveyed my surroundings. Inside the café, the decor included replicas of Degas’s ballet dancers. There was no menu in sight—until I noticed a blackboard out front that read: ICED COFFEE: 500 YEN (TAX EXCLUDED). Two iced coffees would be 1,100 yen, including tax.

It seemed too easy. Would she really give me such a simple test?

I hesitated. If only I could read people's memories through their eyes more easily. With humans, though, their eyes need to well up with tears for me to access anything. Without that, I was left relying on my own observations.

"You're being cautious," she said, mischievously resting her chin on her hand. My heart skipped a beat. She had a way of wearing mystery, as if it were part of her wardrobe.

Wait a moment. Speaking of wardrobes, why was she dressed so differently today? That had to be the key. I glanced at her reflection in the window. Her black high heels clicked against the pavement like a metronome. Black high heels? Those didn't go with her outfit. There was also a shopping bag from a nearby store at her feet. What was going on?

She let out a little yawn. A childlike, adorable yawn. The contrast between that and her usual composed self was striking. A slight tear formed in her almond-shaped eyes. Would that be enough to let me read her memories?

"Excuse me…" She blushed slightly, narrowing her eyes.

"Oh, sorry," I said, averting my gaze. That's when I noticed something important on the ground.

"So are you ready to answer?" she asked.

I quickly pieced together a theory and nodded. "I know the answer. The total is—five hundred fifty yen."

She looked faintly surprised. "And your reasoning?"

I gestured toward the black bag and the new paper shopping bag beside her. "You've got a new outfit, but the black clothes in the bag aren't new. The shoes you're wearing don't match your current outfit, either. Plus, the ground is wet. You said you'd been waiting for twenty minutes, but the ice in your drink is barely melted. My guess? The waiter spilled your drink and ruined your clothes. You went to buy a new outfit and told the waiter I might arrive while you were gone. When you returned, they gave you a fresh coffee. When I showed up, they brought a coffee for me, too. In other words, the bill only reflects the first coffee, which costs five hundred fifty yen."

Sakuraba smiled, flipping over the clipboard to reveal the coffee-stained receipt. It read: 550 YEN.

“Right you are, detective.”

“It was simple logic,” I said, trying to play it cool. “What’s the second condition?”

“Second.” She looked me dead in the eye. “Three dates.”

“What?”

“Go on three dates with me, and I’ll help you.”

“Why…why would you ask that?”

“Why? For the same reason people ask other people on dates. Haven’t you noticed? I find you absolutely fascinating.”

My cheeks flushed bright red. She laughed, calling me cute.

14

“And so you went on a date with her and came home.”

Miri seemed a little distant.

“Well, we just stopped by an art museum for a little while,” I said, fibbing a bit for some reason.

“You flirted and had a great time, didn’t you? And the part about the soft serve…”

Remembering it, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“That was because she was so insistent… I mean, all of this is for the investigation.”

“Hmph.” I found Miri a bit scary today, or maybe it was just my nerves. “Chitose Sakuraba is pretty, too, right?”

“…Yeah, she’s pretty.”

“She’s your type, I know it. Mature, with a good body.”

“…”

Was she still upset about this?

“The type of person I like and the actual person I like aren’t necessarily the same,” I blurted, grasping for something to say. “Like, I might love meat, but it’s rice I eat every day…” I wasn’t even sure what I meant by that.

“Are you going to start going out with Sakuraba?”

“I don’t plan to at this point, but…”

You never know what will happen with feelings. Back in middle school, I once looked into the eyes of a girl who had a crush on someone. It was a pure love, one that seemed destined to last forever. But just three days later, she had a crush on

someone else. I was astonished, almost fearful. What had happened to her previous feelings? Had they vanished, or had her soul from three days ago been replaced by a different one?

Right now, I knew for a fact that I liked Miri. Thinking of her made my heart swell. The idea of losing those feelings chilled me.

“Miri, do you think we could meet in person?”

“What—?” Miri looked caught off guard.

“I’d like to meet you face-to-face. I want to talk in real life, practice acting together, and maybe even go to an art museum. And I think it would help with the investigation.”

Miri didn’t respond. Her expression hardened. The corners of her mouth turned down, and I feared she was angry. But then I saw it—sadness slowly creeping across her face, like blue watercolor soaking through the back of drawing paper.

“I’m sorry, Yochi, but we can’t.”

Pain burned in my chest. The corners of my mouth twitched, though I wasn’t sure if it was to smile or cry.

“You…don’t want to meet me?”

“No, that’s not it!” Miri leaned forward, then pulled back, blurting out, “We can’t.”

“Why?”

Miri looked down. It was night where I was, but dusk where she was. When she finally looked up, her eyes were so dark it seemed like night had already fallen. I trembled slightly.

“I didn’t want to tell you this, but I’ll go ahead and say it. I’m, well, already…”

Miri took a deep breath.

“… dead.”

“What?”

My mind went completely blank for a second. The words were just sounds, disconnected from meaning. My heart thumped. Then it began to pound like an alarm bell.

“Wait a second; I don’t understand what you’re saying. Dead? What do you mean, dead?” I asked, my tongue numb.

“I’m so sorry.”

The ensuing tempest arrived late in assaulting me. The power

of those winds could blow away everything in its path. My head tumbled in utter chaos. It was hard to breathe. I was dizzy, my head spinning. I could hardly even sit up straight.

“In your time, I’m already long gone. So even if we want to meet in person, we can’t.”

“But…why…?” My mind was numb. “How…?”

“You should sleep for now. Good night, Yochi.”

“Wait, Miri—!”

The connection was cut. A surprised Saburou dashed out of my grip and ran off through the open balcony door. I sat there like a soulless doll that couldn’t even blink.

15

“Where has your mind wandered off to?” Sakuraba asked, poking her head up next to me.

“Huh? Oh… No, it’s nothing.”

I had been thinking about Miri. She could see the future, but she was going to die? If she could avoid accidents or murder, maybe it was an illness? She looked fine, but what if some disease was secretly growing inside her? Was she really going to die? Or was she lying?

The sound of cicadas buzzed alongside my racing thoughts.

“Are you okay? Is it maybe heatstroke? Want some water?” Sakuraba handed me a water bottle.

I accepted it absentmindedly, took a drink, and then she teased, “That’s an indirect kiss.”

I choked, and she clapped, laughing hysterically.

“I’m joking, just joking! No one says that anymore.”

Her laughter finally snapped me back to reality. We were sitting on a bench at school, trying to figure out our next move.

“Where were we?”

“Come on, get it together,” she said. “I was telling you how Amagasaki took two weeks off in June.”

That’s right, she was.

“From the start of June until mid-month. Why was that?” I asked.

“She went back to her parents’ house.”

“Did she have a job?”

“Yeah, at a restaurant. She worked hard because of her school loans. But apparently, they made her quit when the pandemic hit.”

“That’s strange.”

“Really? What’s strange?”

“There’s no reason for her to come back to Tokyo, then. With classes and clubs all online and no job, living in Tokyo would just cost her money. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Hmm, that’s a good point. She got along with her parents, didn’t she?”

“I would think so. Maybe she had a lover no one knew about? Or was she just skipping rehearsals?”

“I doubt it. She once sprained her ankle but still came to rehearsals after getting painkillers. People thought Hirutani was obsessed with theater, but Amagasaki’s dedication was on another level.”

“An obsession that dwarfed obsession,” I muttered, my gaze drifting to the shimmering waves of heat rising off the pavement. A shiver ran through me.

“Maybe it was just downtime.”

“Downtime? What’s that?”

“That’s the recovery period after plastic surgery, when you wait for the swelling and bruising to subside.”

“You think she had plastic surgery?”

“Rumor has it she wanted to be a celebrity. It’s possible.”

I recalled Amagasaki’s memories.

I am so smart. So adorable.

“Well, first we should confirm if she actually stayed at her parents’ house during those two weeks.”

I stood up and headed into the men’s room.

Looking in the mirror, I stared into my own eyes. Reading my own memories was always easy—I didn’t even need tears for it. With my ability, I never had to take notes.

The scene replayed in my mind—when Karin Amagasaki’s parents came to my apartment. Their despondent expressions, showing the grief of parents who had lost their daughter, brought

back waves of sorrow.

I remembered them leaving a piece of paper with their phone number as they departed. I replayed the moment chronologically in my mind.

The me in the memory noticed the bandage wrapped around the mother's wrist. A sense of danger flickered.

Then the me in the memory looked into Karin Amagasaki's mother's eyes, and—

Suddenly, my brain felt like it had been tossed into a blender. I was disoriented, fizzing like soda, and then burst. A sensation more intense than anything I had ever felt surged through me like the shock of dipping your feet into the ocean magnified three billion times. It was as if my very soul was being swept away, light and dizzy, as though standing between two mirrors reflecting endlessly. Before I knew it, I was inside her memories. It was like stepping into a dream without realizing I'd fallen asleep.

"My" time with my daughter. The time, the time—!

"My" feelings with my daughter. The feelings, the feelings—!

The me in the memory abruptly broke the connection.

I burst out of those memories.

Tears streamed from the eyes of the me in the mirror. The mother and I stared at each other in confusion, bewildered. She began to cry along with me.

"I'm so sorry," her husband said. "You're in shock, too, and we showed up out of the blue."

They left a piece of paper with their address and phone number in case I needed to contact them.

As they left, I limply shut the door behind them.

I broke the connection, wiping away my tears and sweat. This was the first time I had ever looked into someone's eyes *while* already inside someone else's memories. Only a fraction of a millisecond had passed in reality, but the experience felt incredibly compressed—time within memories seemed to fold in on itself.

I stared blankly for a while, waiting for the trembling to subside. Eventually, I washed my face and took several deep

breaths to regain my composure.

Once calm, I made a phone call. I hoped the father would answer—I didn't want the mother to have to relive such painful memories.

"This is the Amagasakis."

I sighed in relief. It was the father. I greeted him, explaining that I had joined the Drama Club and made up a story about one of the members wanting to retrieve something important they had lent to Karin.

"I heard she went back home for two weeks at the start of June __"

"What? Karin wasn't here," he said, adding something completely unexpected. "That was when she was in the hospital with COVID."

"Wait, COVID?" I repeated, shocked.

"Yes. We were so relieved it wasn't severe…"

My reflection in the mirror stared back at me in disbelief.

16

It was time for Drama Club. A piece of paper hung on the door yet again.

Lightning Strikes Down Sinners.

"How revolting…," Sakuraba muttered, crumpling the piece of paper into a ball.

"Why do these notes keep appearing on the door? What do they mean?"

"I don't know. It's some kind of prank. I tear them down right away, but no one else seems bothered enough to take them down."

"Really? They kind of look like the audition flyers, so I thought Amou was behind it."

About ten people were already in the room. Sakuraba leaned in and whispered into my ear, "Ishikawa's here again today. I'll go talk to her."

As she walked away, Sugai appeared, as if to replace her.

"Hey, Kamisuki! You and Sakuraba sure are spending a lot of time together these days, huh?!"

“That’s pretty observant. But it’s nothing.”

“No way, no way! Sakuraba is usually so aloof. She doesn’t hang out with guys!”

“Not true. Believe it or not, she jokes around quite a bit.”

“So you’re the only one who knows this secret side of her, huh? Damn, you’re bragging!”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Across the room, Sakuraba and Ishikawa were deep in conversation, laughing. Honestly, if she were my girlfriend, I might want to brag, too. Just then the door swung open, and Amou entered the room.

“Hey, everyone! Today is another perfect day for acting!”

He was full of energy, but stubble covered his sunken cheeks, and dark bags hung beneath his eyes.

“What happened to you? You look like a zombie!” I blurted.

“Ha-ha-ha! Nice one!”

“I actually mean it! You’re acting really weird!”

“Heh-heh-heh. I feel moved to sing, ‘…Cuckoo; Cuckoo, cuckoo’!”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s from Shakespeare’s ‘Spring,’” Sakuraba called out from beside Ishikawa.

“Finally, the new play! It’s complete!”

Amou spread his arms wide like Moses parting the sea, and the room went so silent it felt like time stood still. In the next instant, everyone cheered wildly and rushed forward.

He shared the file containing the script with everyone, and we spread out across the room, immersing ourselves in reading.

The play was called *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*. Originally meant as three separate works—*The Maiden of Kissho*, *The Silvering of the Flaming Forest*, and *The Light of Salvation*. This script covered the *Maiden of Kissho* story.

I was hooked from the beginning, devouring the tiny letters on my phone screen. I rubbed my eyes, envying the people reading on tablets. A few had already dashed out of the room to print it. My desire to keep reading uninterrupted won out.

The main character was Tetsumonkai Shonin, based on a real monk born in 1789. He joined Churenji Temple at twenty-one to become a Buddhist monk and eventually mummified himself at

the age of seventy-one.

17

Sunada Tetsu, who would later become Tetsumonkai Shonin, was born in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture, and worked as a longshoreman on the Seiryu River. One day, he met a mysterious, terrifyingly beautiful woman and instantly fell in love with her. She was being pursued, so Tetsu took her onto his boat. A violent storm assaulted the Seiryu River, and they barely escaped with their lives. When Tetsu asked what had happened, she explained that she had been a maid for a wealthy merchant family. Her name was Suzume, and she had fled because people believed she had killed the head of the family. Together, they sneak around the merchant's house to investigate the truth—and in the process, they fall madly in love. Though uneducated, Tetsu possesses a sharp mind and displays the faculties of a detective. He manages to brilliantly uncover the truth behind what really happened.

However, the culprit devises a trap, and they are cornered. They decide to die together, yet Tetsu survives.

I paused from reading the script to catch my breath. Everyone around me was engrossed in the story. It was well polished, and every scene worked to advance the plot. Even though I was only a quarter of the way through, it felt like I had watched a high-quality movie. The pace was about to quicken even more.

Tetsu, now Tetsumonkai, enters Churenji Temple, where he begins rigorous daily practices. After losing the vision in his left eye—an eye stained by Suzume's blood—a woman's face faintly appears in the darkness. One day, a lost woman arrives at the temple, a place forbidden to women. Upon seeing her, Tetsumonkai flees the temple and begins traveling as a wandering vagabond. He believes his evil thoughts had manifested the apparition, for the woman looks exactly like Suzume.

During his travels, Tetsumonkai decides to dig a tunnel under Kamozaka Pass to connect Kamo Harbor to the town around

Tsurugaoka Castle. The area was important for businesses, but the treacherous path had long troubled the locals. For the first few years, he digs alone, never stopping. As he digs, the woman in his left eye fully materializes and begins speaking to him. She reveals herself as a goddess. When Ono no Komachi, an unparalleled beauty and one of the legendary six Rokkasen poets of the Heian period, visited what is now Sagae City in Yamagata, a goddess appeared in the sky one day, dropping robes embroidered with the image of the eleven-headed Kannon Bosatsu. Ono no Komachi made her personal Buddha statue a principal object of worship, offering the robes and the seven jewels alongside it and naming it the Rakusho Kannon. The same goddess, now in Tetsumonkai's eye, tells him that she had been wandering Earth when some nameless thief mercilessly murdered and ate her. He believed that doing so would grant him the power of immortality. However, he did not get the gift of eternal life but rather an eternity in hell. The man and the goddess were bound together by this curse, tied by fate to be reincarnated again and again, each time meeting and falling in love, only to have one of them kill the other. And Tetsumonkai is that man this time, while Suzume is the reincarnation of the goddess.

Horrified by his fate, Tetsumonkai becomes entranced by the goddess. He continues digging in an attempt to shake off his weariness, and the villagers who had been watching from afar finally decide to help him, quickening their progress. But soon they uncover an inexplicable crime—a warm body buried among the rocks. Distressed, Tetsumonkai sets his mind to solving the mystery and, in doing so, attains the Buddhist state of "form is emptiness." The villagers rejoice at the completion of the tunnel, but Tetsumonkai had already disappeared.

It turns out that Suzume had a younger brother. His name is Azami, and after Suzume's death, he slipped away from the merchant's house, sensing that his life was in danger. Nourishing his soul with nothing but the promise of revenge, he had eked out a living of sin no better than a stray dog while searching for Tetsumonkai.

When Tetsumonkai arrives in Edo during his pilgrimage around Japan, a woman bumps into him. Tetsumonkai is

astonished. She is the living image of Suzume, who had wandered lost into Churenji Temple, but now pus runs from her eyes. Though horrified, Tetsumonkai starts to support this woman named Hibari who was losing her sight. At the same time, they begin looking into the cause of the eye disease spreading rapidly across Edo. And again, they start to feel a wild love rise within them.

It is during this time that Azami reappears. Bent on revenge, his rage evaporates when he sees Hibari, the spitting image of his beloved sister. Soon, he begins to care for and love her, and he decides to help Tetsumonkai.

Unaware of the statistic-based analysis method Florence Nightingale established during her time in the Crimean War, Tetsumonkai deduces that the cause lay in poor plumbing. However, his arguments are ignored. As the affliction worsens, Tetsumonkai's love for Hibari grows stronger. In a moment of agony, he stands on Ryogoku Bridge and digs out his left eye—the goddess's home—and tosses it into the Sumida River as an offering to the Dragon God. The spectacle convinces the people of Edo to finally act, and the disease vanishes. Tetsumonkai is praised as the Blessed Eye Doctor.

This all impresses Azami, too, but he cannot forget his past, where he lived solely for revenge. So, utterly consumed by his distress, one evening he attacks Tetsumonkai in the dark. However, Tetsumonkai achieves enlightenment in the same darkness and recognizes a frightening truth. That he was Azami in a previous life. The cycle of reincarnation exists independently of time. Past and previous versions of oneself can exist in the same temporal space.

At that moment, a body lies dead—it is Azami. Hibari, accustomed to living in the dark, had stabbed him. Realizing the terrible depth of his karma, Tetsumonkai weeps blood from his empty eye socket.

Now a murderer, Hibari flees with Tetsumonkai toward Churenji Temple. They run down the Oshu Kaido to Koori, then from Koori down the Ushu Highway. At Shichikashuku, however, they share a night together. Overwhelmed by love and regret, Tetsumonkai weeps and then borrows a knife from the host of the inn. He flees, leaving a package for Hibari. The next morning,

she opens it to find Tetsumonkai's severed penis inside.

Back at Churenji Temple, Tetsumonkai undertakes rigorous ascetic training, hoping to forget both the goddess and Hibari. He begins preparing for mummification, eating only nuts, roots, and bark to preserve his body after death. After a thousand days, he begins the process of burying himself in a small underground stone room and meditating. He rings a bell continuously, and when the bell can no longer be heard through the bamboo pole running to the surface, his transformation would be complete.

Abandoned at Shichikashuku, Hibari lives an arduous life that weakens her, yet she still yearns for Tetsumonkai. She didn't know his whereabouts for a long time, but after hearing rumors that he had gone to Churenji Temple to mummify himself, she made the difficult decision to cross Mt. Yudono. The path is treacherous for someone in poor health and blind, but her only thought is to be with Tetsumonkai again.

Meanwhile, Tetsumonkai sits in darkness, reflecting on the "deliverance" Buddha had achieved. He pondered the cycle of reincarnation, a constant wandering between life and death. He knows that only those who achieved a state of nothingness through transcendental training would escape this endless rebirth. He longs to break free of the cursed cycle of reincarnation with the goddess.

As Buddha faces Mara's temptations while meditating under the bodhi tree, so does Tetsumonkai when the goddess appears again in his right eye. She is strikingly beautiful, radiant with a vibrancy contrasting with Tetsumonkai's now-shriveled form. Whispering words of love, the goddess reminds him of their past lives. When the thief had tried to kill her, she sneered, explaining that they were bound by a curse—to fall in love and kill each other for eternity, a fate she relished. The thief never understood what she meant.

In the darkness, Tetsumonkai sees a shining cord glimmering—the cord that bound the two lovers in their endless cycle of reincarnation. Hesitantly, he reaches out a finger to pluck the cord. A fierce wave of nostalgia and affection surges within him, but his inhuman willpower allows him to resist.

Ring…ring…ring…

The bell continued to chime, though the intervals between

rings slowly widened. Tetsumonkai's soul had overcome temptation, and as the last remnants of life were about to leave his body…

"Tetsumonkai!" Hibari called out. With the last of her strength, she broke free from the temple disciples holding her back and, clinging to the bamboo pipe, continued shouting his name.

From a great distance, Tetsumonkai hears her. A single tear escapes from his parched body as he envisions Hibari's beautiful figure. In his final moments, his face softens. He becomes a bodhisattva.

The bell falls silent. Hibari never moves again.

Two small birds dance high in the sky.

18

By the time I finished reading, the sky had already darkened. It felt as though time had shifted—like barely any time had passed, yet decades had slipped by. I looked around. The room was silent. Those who had finished reading sat quietly, savoring the lingering emotions of the play, while others were still engrossed in the script. I was deeply moved, my thoughts swirling. It was a masterpiece. The influence of my étude was clear, and that étude would never have happened if I hadn't met Miri. I could feel the "touch of fate" in how everything connected.

I glanced over at Sakuraba.

A single tear rolled down her cheek, catching the light of the setting sun.

19

Rehearsals began the next day. We separated into cast and crew, diving into the work of preparing *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*—performance, music, lighting, everything required for the production. The room buzzed with energy.

It felt like I was on a powerful train, hurtling toward an unknown future I couldn't control. And I still hadn't had the chance to talk to Miri again. My mind was continuing to process everything that had happened, making it hard to focus on acting.

“He’s a genius! Amou is pure genius!” Samura could hardly contain himself. “When I saw *The Specter of the Furrow*, I didn’t think anything could top it. But this has! Amou’s legend is just beginning!”

“He’s at it again,” Sugai muttered, shaking his head. “The fanatic’s getting out of hand.”

“Well, can you blame him after reading that?” Isemi said with a bitter smile. “We always said Amou was great, but he might actually be the best in Japan. A mere mortal like me will be left in the dust…”

His usual sly expression had been replaced by dejection.

“You’ll be fine. You’re rich,” Sugai said, attempting to be supportive, though it didn’t seem to help.

Isemi tapped the face of his watch and left without another word.

“Oh, I pissed him off,” Sugai said, scratching his nose. “He wants to be ‘somebody,’ while that ‘somebody’ is at home getting a good night’s sleep.”

Amou, who had barely slept while writing *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*, was absent today, apparently sleeping like the dead. Strangely enough, even that seemed to add to his aura of genius.

As I read through my lines, I realized this would be the hardest role I’d ever taken on. Tetsumonkai started as a rough, bloodthirsty scoundrel—completely opposite from me, a pale, lanky homebody. I wasn’t sure I could capture the raw power and brutal rhythm of his words.

Sakuraba, on the other hand, had no trouble at all. She would adjust her eyes, and in an instant, she became Suzume. Playing Suzume, the goddess, and Hibari was no easy task, but she made it look effortless.

During the next break, Sakuraba quietly waved me over. We moved to a spot where no one could see us.

“I talked with Ishikawa in lighting,” she said in a hushed tone, “and to cut to the chase, I think there’s something suspicious about Kuroyama.”

“Kuroyama?” I hadn’t expected that name. “Why do you think that?”

She unfolded a piece of paper with a calendar on it.

“Remember how Amagasaki was in the hospital with COVID during those two weeks? Well, Kuroyama was also absent during that time.”

“He was?”

She nodded. “He misses practice often, but those two weeks he was definitely gone. And Ishikawa mentioned that Amagasaki was seeing someone in the club. She didn’t know who, though.”

“You think she was seeing Kuroyama, they met up during lockdown, and she caught COVID?”

“Exactly. But if that’s true, Kuroyama’s been acting way too calm for someone who just lost a girlfriend.”

“I see… It’s worth looking into.”

Maybe I could find a way to look into Kuroyama’s eyes. One glance would be enough to see any memory as intense as committing murder.

“Thanks, Sakuraba.”

“Chitose,” she corrected.

“Huh?”

“Call me Chitose.”

She sounded a little hesitant. I flustered for a moment, but she added with a playful laugh, “And don’t forget, we still have two more dates.”

She walked away, her high heels clicking against the floor. I scratched the back of my head, gathered myself, and returned to the rehearsal room—only to stop dead in my tracks.

Kuroyama was walking down the hall toward the clubroom. I rushed after him.

“Everyone, listen up!” Kuroyama shouted as he entered the room. “Kandagawa has read *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*!”

Kandagawa—? I didn’t know the name, but the room erupted in astonished gasps as people crowded around him. Investigating Kuroyama now seemed impossible. The normally stoic Kuroyama was animated, slapping the bundled script in his hands.

“A masterpiece! Kandagawa is giving his full support! We’re going to perform this in a big theater!”

Cheers filled the room as people hugged one another, completely forgetting about social distancing. I stared at Kuroyama’s back, horrified, feeling the rampant flow of fate

brush against my skin.

20

That same day, some students at the university unrelated to the Drama Club tested positive for COVID, so the following day, we went back to quarantine, followed by the summer break.

21

“For now, let’s just do what we can,” Amou’s voice echoed from my computer screen as we wrapped up the day. I took my temperature—it read one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. I had received my first dose of the vaccine yesterday and felt utterly drained this morning, but I still decided to join the meeting.

I took some Loxoprofen and went to lie down in bed. The air conditioner hummed with its familiar rumble. Ten days had passed since Amou finished writing *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*, but so many things seemed to have gone awry. Our rehearsal frequency had plummeted, and despite our eagerness to perform, we had barely made any progress. The investigation into the shooting hadn’t moved forward, and Chitose and I hadn’t gone on any more dates. The worst part was that Saburou still hadn’t returned. Where was he? What was he doing? What if something had happened to him? If so, I might never see him or Miri again. And I wouldn’t be able to prevent more murders. Just thinking about it made me depressed.

I stared at the ceiling as the hours slipped into the evening. When night fell, I turned on the lights and started reading through *The Notes*, the unique script Amou had created. The title seemed to stem from the triple meaning of “notes”—as in written script, musical tone, and symbolic markings. The script was divided into two parts: The top held a musical score in a four-beat measure, and the bottom where he used his original notations to meticulously plot entrances and exits and the timing of the lines.

“Do you know this quote?” Amou had said ten days earlier. “The early Victorian-era critic Walter Pater once said, ‘*All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music*.’ To me, the more

sophisticated a play is, the closer it gets to becoming music. Every element functions like an instrument performing a beautiful piece. That's what I'm aiming for."

I'd heard rumors that Amou had a background in violin and loved Bach. It was surprising, given his appearance—I had pegged him as someone who preferred the shamisen or Wagner. But setting that aside, after ten days of practicing, I could understand his notes to some degree. And if I followed the notations precisely, some sort of chord progression emerged. Counting the tempo with my finger, I practiced my parts in my mind.

Preparing myself for tomorrow, I eventually fell into a light, uncertain sleep.

22

At nine in the morning, everyone turned on their cameras, and their rooms and faces gradually appeared on-screen.

"Okay, we're all here," Amou said. His room filled the main window, decorated with random items like a tengu mask, a Star Wars poster, and a piece of calligraphy that read MASTER THYSELF. I laughed every time I saw it. The bookshelf behind him was crammed with books like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Dogra Magra*, *Sutta Nipata*, and other titles that sounded like chants. The overall effect made his room feel otherworldly.

"Today, just like the schedule says, we'll start from the top and go about a quarter of the way through."

The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms ran just under three hours, so we had about forty-five minutes to cover today. It would take us to the point where Sunada Tetsu and Suzume try to kill themselves, leaving Tetsu as the sole survivor.

Kuroyama picked up where Amou left off. His screen showed a projector, audio equipment, and a potted monstera. His chair was an expensive model with a headrest. I watched him with mixed feelings—it was possible he had killed Amagasaki.

"It doesn't have to be perfect. Just maintain the tempo and keep up the general flow. Crew, use this as a reference for scheduling later. All right then, we start at nine thirty."

We did our final checks. I opened my script, but the words wouldn't come to me. I decided against taking my anxiety meds, closed my eyes, and tried to push through it.

Nine thirty came, and the run-through began.

"All right. Come on, come on, odd or even, place your bets!"

The first scene took place in a gambling den. The games moved along at a good rhythm, and Sunada Tetsu was winning big. Then Tetsu caught the dealer cheating and flew into a rage. A brawl broke out. My voice sounded shrill at first, but I gradually settled into the role. The person being beaten leaned into the camera, making pained sounds that elicited hoots and applause. That calmed my nerves instantly. This was serious, but it was practice, so we could have fun, too. Suddenly, it became much more enjoyable. The script created a magnificent rhythm, and I immersed myself in the role, forgetting about the others watching me.

Finally, Suzume made her debut.

A modern, stylish apartment appeared in the main window. Then Chitose's face faded in, hidden behind a traditional Japanese straw hat, as though she were fleeing something. It was a clever move—just that simple action conveyed a sense of tension. As always, she somehow "wore the mystery," drawing all eyes to her. We grew excited for what would happen next. I was so engrossed that I almost lost the tempo, breaking into a cold sweat.

We reached the scene where we escaped down the river in a shoddy boat, and the incredibly immersive sound effects of the storm made us deliver our lines with more emotion.


Miwako Hirutani
Takeru Samura
Minato Isemi
Umeko Hiyama

The story moved to the merchant's house. I checked the time and was surprised that more than ten minutes had passed. It had felt like an instant. I was doubly surprised at how much of the play had been packed into such a short time. I wiped the sweat from my brow, steadied my breathing, and jumped into the next scene.

The mysterious intrigue surrounding the merchant family unfolded, and Tetsu and Suzume fell in love. I understood why some male actors fall for their female costars. It was hard to tell whether I felt my character's emotions or my own. On top of that, Chitose's acting was incredible. She could switch from playing an innocent, blushing maiden to "wearing the mystery," becoming as enthralling and as peering into a bottomless lake. I struggled to keep up, simulating the experience of a man completely under her spell.

The scene where we hugged was absolutely embarrassing. Since we were doing this online, we had to hug the air while whispering words of love. I could feel sweat trickling down my neck. But Chitose nailed the scene, never looking flustered and moving gracefully the entire time.

The story approached the climax of the first section. The pace quickened and the energy built to the point of bursting. Tetsu's skills as a detective came to the forefront, and something felt right as I acted out the part where he solved the murder. It was like a wave of confidence, similar to riding a horse, in which you share a mutual understanding. I saw Amou nodding on my screen, and somehow, I was sure he had known all along how things would turn out.

Tetsu and Suzume solved the murder brilliantly, but the real killer schemed to have them pursued even further. Realizing they had no escape, the two resolved to die together. They promised to meet in the next life and took turns stabbing each other's stomachs with a knife before throwing themselves into the Seiryu River. But Tetsu survived.

"I've killed Suzume!" Tetsu wailed in despair as their pursuers closed in. After wrestling with this bitter truth, he made up his mind to kill them as well.

"I've killed one person, and now fate calls me to kill more!"

And just at the moment, *ring*—a bell sounded.

A bell?

At first, I thought my ears were playing tricks on me, so I continued the scene. But then I heard it again.

Ring… Ring… Ring…

The eerie sound continued.

“What’s that sound?” Amou finally asked, and the scene came to a halt. Suddenly, Sugai screamed.

“Kuroyama!”

A chorus of screams followed. I quickly expanded Kuroyama’s window and felt a chill of horror.

A mummy stood behind him.

It wore a crimson upper robe, a blue-and-yellow monastic robe, and a golden ceremonial Kannon hat. Its face was dry and shriveled. It was undeniably a mummy, standing still, eerily behind Kuroyama. Its right hand moved, producing the ringing sound…the chime of a bell. I stared in silence as an icy chill crawled up my spine.

“What is it, guys?” Kuroyama asked, tilting his head.

“Behind you!” Sugai shouted.

“Behind me?”

He turned in his chair, and in that instant, the mummy moved.

The image of it reaching out with its left arm blocked the camera. My terrified reflection shimmered on the now-pitch-black screen.

A gunshot rang out.

The darkness cleared.

Someone screamed.

A hole gaped in Kuroyama’s chest.

The mummy rang the bell one more time before turning away from the camera and walking silently through the door, leaving no sound of footsteps behind.

Amid the chorus of screams, I buried my face in my hands and collapsed to my knees on the floor.

The second murder had just happened.

23

Amou called the police and instructed us not to do anything until further notice. A short while later, a police officer appeared on-screen. I turned off my microphone and decided to lie on the floor, my mind heavy with shock. I couldn't think. It felt like my brain was weighed down with lead.

After what felt like forever, I heard a scratching sound.

Saburou was pawing at the glass. I yelped in surprise and quickly opened the sliding glass door.

"Where in the world have you been…?"

Tears filled my eyes. He smelled like the street, but I picked him up without hesitation. He purred and swished his tail. I sat on the floor again, looking into Saburou's eyes—

Miri appeared, looking desolate. I couldn't speak for a moment.

"Long time no see," I began, then remembered how time worked differently for us. "The second murder happened."

"Kuroyama… It's such a shame. It's so sad."

There was something strange about how she said it. A cold sensation crawled up my spine.

"…Did you know Kuroyama would be murdered?" I asked.

Miri's face turned pale. Her hazel eyes, usually bright like jewels, seemed to hold a deep, endless void in their center. Her cherry blossom–colored lips trembled before she finally spoke.

"Yes, I did."

For a second, my mind was blank. Then a flood of sorrow and anger surged through me, and I couldn't hold back the tears.

"What do you mean? You knew and didn't say anything? Did you let him get murdered?"

"I'm so sorry," she said, her face expressionless. "Kuroyama's death… It was fate. It had already been decided, and nothing we could have done would have changed it."

"Fate? What good is that? You say we couldn't change anything, but I can't accept that. What if I had found a way to stop rehearsals today? Would Kuroyama still have been

murdered?”

“It’s not that simple. Even if you had, he would have been killed another day, in a different way. Matters of life and death can’t be reversed except in extreme circumstances… That’s why I’m going to die, too.”

Silence fell between us. Saburou mewed sadly.

Miri touched her left earring, her voice filled with resignation.

“As things stand now, I die in a plane crash. And if I don’t get on that plane, it’ll be a car accident, or someone will attack me on the street, or I’ll die from a disease. The method changes, but the result is the same. That’s how fate works.”

My chest ached. There was a deep sense of resignation in her voice. But still, I couldn’t accept it. Maybe Miri was lying. Maybe there was another reason we couldn’t meet in person, and she was actually alive, keeping it a secret. It wasn’t impossible… But how could I catch her in the lie?

If I could look into her eyes…

I shivered at the thought.

The other day, I had looked into my own eyes in the mirror and then into Karin’s mother’s eyes within those memories. Could I do the same with Miri, using Saburou as a link? If she knew the future—if she had memories involving the future—couldn’t I see it by looking into those memories?

Something about the idea felt dangerous. I had a bad feeling about it. It could bring about the absolute worst.

But even so, I longed for the hope that Miri might still be alive.

To look into her eyes, I had to make her cry.

I closed my eyes and imagined Miri’s death. I focused, making it vivid, real. As I did, a deep sadness welled up inside me. When I opened my eyes, tears streamed down my face. Just imagining her horrible fate was enough to bring me to tears.

I didn’t say anything. I just let the tears flow.

“Yochi, I’m so sorry,” Miri said, her face twisting in sadness. Then tears began to trickle from her eyes.

I looked into Miri’s eyes and made a connection, and—

An intense sensation of my mind being thrown into a blender

assaults me.

Reality and dreams, dreams and myself, the border between them disappears, plummeting endlessly into the depths of opposing mirrors…

I hear a sound. Like wind blowing through a tree hollow.

The sound of a fire crackling. The smell of burning, the sensation of rain hitting my cheeks.

A fantastic drowsiness overcomes me, my eyelids tremendously heavy.

My vision is blurry; the rain pours down unforgivingly.

I see a dark moon.

A full black moon burns, engulfed in the flames of hell.

Something wears that moon like a shadowy halo, looking down upon me.

A sharp pain burns in my abdomen. A deathly pain. A hole gapes in my stomach. I can feel the life pour out of me with each heartbeat.

I know it for certain.

I’m going to die.

And then the connection was cut.

Act 3

1

I found myself in an unfamiliar part of town. As I came to my senses, I realized I was wedged into a depression by a narrow road, soaked from the heavy rain, with a twenty-ounce can of a high-content-alcohol cocktail in one hand. I didn't have my cell phone or wallet, so I had no idea how I got the booze. My teeth rattled, and my whole body was freezing. I felt nauseous but drank the booze anyway, hoping to warm up.

A book was stuffed into my rear pants pocket: *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. In the story, the protagonist suddenly finds himself transformed into a bug one day. It felt like that had happened to me. My stomach churned, and I retched. I almost tossed the book away but stopped when I remembered how much Miri treasured books.

My sinuses burned as I sobbed. Without a doubt, I had seen a memory from the future—Miri really was going to die. I didn't understand the meaning of the shadowy moon and the flames, but somehow, she would die, a hole torn through her stomach, somewhere dark and cold. It was unbearably sad. I also thought about Kuroyama. Was he truly destined to die? Could I have prevented it if I had just tried harder?

As those thoughts swirled in my mind, the rain stopped, and the sky began to brighten. I felt utterly miserable, but the morning light filtering through the tall buildings was undeniably beautiful.

I stumbled home. I must have tried to run as far as I could yesterday but hadn't made it very far. I arrived home at nine in the morning, took a shower, and went straight to bed.

2

Five days after Kuroyama's murder, we traveled to his hometown in Tochigi for his funeral. A clear blue sky reflected off the traditional Japanese roof tiles of a wide, wooden one-story house surrounded by nature. A flycatcher sang brightly, perched atop an Onigawara gargoyle. Beneath it, our solemn ceremony continued in silence. White chrysanthemums surrounded a picture of Kuroyama smiling reservedly. He had always appeared aloof, with a cigarette in his hand, but his snaggletooth smile made him look innocent and frail.

Occasionally, people who looked like newspaper reporters tried to approach but were turned away. Information about the police officer's missing gun being used in a series of murders had been leaked to the press, causing a major commotion among the daily news outlets. None had mentioned the word *mummy* yet, so they didn't know about that part.

The ceremony reached the moment for lighting incense. A priest appeared, and suddenly someone screamed—it was Hirutani. She began hyperventilating, repeating, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die…" Some club members escorted her out of the room.

"The robe probably reminded her of the incident," I whispered to Umeko, who was sitting next to me. With her hair sprayed black, she looked like a prim, regular woman in a moderate amount of makeup. She covered her mouth and whispered back.

"She thinks it's the mummy's curse."

"A-a curse?" I stammered. "Come on."

"She's really into the occult. Lives by her horoscope, believes in conspiracy theories. She once cursed Karin and thinks that curse affected Kuroyama. Now she believes it might have passed on to her."

"Well, as they say, curses come home to roost."

The priest played the prayer through his cell phone, explaining that it was a precaution against infection, and then struck a wooden bell. People really do think differently.

We moved to the crematorium to say our final good-byes. The sound of gentle sobbing filled the hall as I approached the coffin. Kuroyama looked as if he were sleeping peacefully; the bullet had passed through his heart, sparing his face. Tears welled up, and I hurried away. Amou, his eyes bright red, stood rigid before the

coffin. In a small voice, he whispered, “We’ll meet again on the stage.”

The body was then moved into the cremation chamber.

We headed to the reception hall for the traditional post-ceremony meal. The Drama Club members mingled with Kuroyama’s family, sharing stories. Making it through the cremation had somewhat calmed our nerves.

“You still look grim,” Chitose remarked from my left, through the plastic panel erected for infection prevention. She wore a formal dress and a pearl necklace. “I’ve been trying to contact you. Why haven’t you texted back?”

“Sorry, I haven’t been feeling well…” In truth, I had caught a cold after being out in the rain that night. I could have texted her, but I just didn’t have the energy. Misunderstanding my silence, she said:

“You don’t think you’re responsible for this, do you?”

“What—?”

“You probably think you should’ve done more to find the killer. Don’t be so full of yourself. Are you trying to be a detective or something?”

I couldn’t reply. Suddenly, she slapped me on the back, surprising me. Then she kindly added, “Don’t overthink it. I know you’ll make me proud, my little detective.”

With that, she moved seats. I scratched the back of my neck, feeling lighter, as if a weight had been lifted. She really was something else.

“I suspected as much. You two are dating, aren’t you?” Umeko asked casually from my right.

“We’re not dating. But it seems like you might be interested in someone. Or am I wrong?” I pointed to the caricature of Isemi she had drawn on the sleeve of her disposable chopsticks.

“Oh, that? I was just doodling. It helps me relax. I’m not interested in him at all. Actually, I can barely tolerate him. He’s such a show-off. He took out a loan during college to buy that fancy watch, flaunts his family’s wealth to impress girls, and only wears brand-name clothes. I despise people like that.”

“Geez…” Her bluntness made me feel a bit sorry for him, so I let the subject drop.

She pointed to the man talking with Isemi. “That guy is

Yukinao Kandagawa, the producer."

Producers oversee planning, progress, and budgeting. Rumor had it that he managed a theater company and had been so moved when he saw *The Specter of the Furrow* that he backed its commercial production. With his help, we'd perform *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* on a big stage.

"Oh, that's him? He seems as nice as they say."

Kandagawa, a man in his late fifties, looked every bit the part of a gentleman, with streaks of white in his neatly styled hair. His round, black-rimmed glasses and mustache gave him an artistic air, and the wrinkles around his eyes deepened when he smiled.

A while later, he approached me and introduced himself. "Kuroyama told me about you. He said you came out of nowhere to grab the lead for *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*."

"Yes… I was lucky. I only hope my work ethic can make up for my lack of experience."

Kandagawa looked me straight in the eye and nodded. "Could we meet tomorrow? There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

I was surprised but agreed to meet him, and we exchanged contact information.

As I walked away, I overheard Kuroyama's parents talking.

"He had just gotten over COVID, and then this…"

So those two weeks he had been absent were due to COVID. But I still couldn't tell how it all connected.

We returned to the crematorium to transfer Kuroyama's bones to the funeral pot. In that silent space, I couldn't help but wonder where Miri's bones might be at this moment.

The funeral concluded without incident. As we were leaving, Kuroyama's parents called Amou over. They spoke kindly to him, then handed him a small box. He bowed humbly several times before suddenly breaking into a wail. Walking back to us with tears streaming down his face, he declared, "I will do whatever it takes to make *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* happen. Are you with me?!"

We all responded with a spirited cry, wrapping our arms around the sobbing Amou as we walked to the station.

On the Shinkansen ride home, Sugai drank too much beer and threw up in the toilet.

3

I met Kandagawa at three in the afternoon in a café near Shinjuku Station. He wore a light-blue knit polo shirt with slim-fitting ankle-length pants, completing his stylishly casual look with a pair of sandals. When I arrived, he stood to greet me with a smile. We both ordered Vienna coffees.

“So you’re from Hyogo? I went there once. What was it called? There’s a row of gorgeous cherry trees…”

“The Ono Sakura Zutsumi Corridor. The tunnel of cherry trees goes on forever.”

“Yes, that’s it. It was stunning. These days, I can never seem to remember the words I want. It’s quite annoying.”

He laughed, covering his embarrassment. But when the conversation shifted to theater, he seamlessly rattled off specific names and ideas. Along with his theories on acting, he shared fascinating stories about theaters and famous actors.

“He’s handsome, but he’ll show his true colors soon enough. In the end, anyone who doesn’t work hard and with passion will never make it. He’s a complete ham who never practiced, so I had to fire him.”

I nodded, then said, “And today, you’re trying to figure out whether I’m a ham who will practice hard, right?”

Kandagawa raised his left eyebrow slightly, lowered his glasses, and looked at me over the rims.

“You’re quick, just like they said… Don’t think less of me for saying this, but I’m betting what’s left of my life on *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*. I need to weed out the bad seeds early.”

“I understand,” I replied, meeting his gaze without flinching. “And I’m prepared to withdraw gracefully if needed.”

He pursed his lips and nodded twice.

“You’re…not bad. I saw the video of your zombie étude. I’ve never seen an amateur act so well in my entire career. If you’re a ham, you’re a good one.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. I wasn’t upset at all. He laughed, sounding youthful.

“Good. There’s something I’d like to show you. Come with me.”

We left the café and walked for about ten minutes until we reached an old building with a tiled facade.

“This is my studio. It has a rehearsal space, a sound room, and a small stage.”

The rooms were old but well maintained. We headed to a southwestern room on the third floor, which housed a projector, a screen, and a row of folding chairs. As Kandagawa closed the blackout curtains, he said, “Seeing is believing. More often than not, experience is the best teacher. Do you know who Ason Amou is?”

I shook my head.

“He’s Shimao’s grandfather. About thirty years ago, I saw a video of his *Maiden of Kissho*. It was black-and-white, and the video quality was terrible, but that didn’t matter. The play captivated me instantly, and I watched it obsessively. That moment taught me everything I know about theater—like a torch coming to dispel the darkness.”

He flicked a switch on the wall, and fluorescent lights illuminated the room.

“*The Maiden of Kissho*,” I murmured. “That’s the same title as the first part of *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*.”

“I thought I’d never see anything better, but *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* might surpass it. I believe Shimao is trying to outdo his grandfather, to finish what Ason started.”

“What did Ason start?”

“Ason staked everything on *The Maiden of Kissho*, a three-part work. He poured his life savings into constructing a building called the Goddess House to perform it. But when his wife, the lead actress, died by suicide for unknown reasons, everything fell apart. In his despair, Ason never set foot onstage again. He eventually grew very sick, and in his final days, barely conscious, he kept muttering, ‘Burn the Goddess House down,’ over and over.”

A heavy silence fell. Kandagawa finished setting up the projector and turned off the lights, plunging the room into darkness.

“Ason was probably the victim of a curse,” he said quietly.

I shivered.

“All his plays dealt with curses—creating them, breaking them,

dissolving the barrier between fiction and reality, opening a crack between this world and the next, drawing the audience in, and then releasing them. Do you know how curses are made?”

I shook my head again.

“Ason was known for his innovative theatrical techniques, like rotating platforms and trapdoors, but he was also an avant-garde artist. He once created a piece called *The Life of a Curse*. It was just a featureless white wall with a single hole in it. Nothing else. But every person who looked inside screamed hysterically. Nervously, I approached the hole and looked in.”

“What did you see?” I asked, swallowing hard.

“Someone’s back,” he replied. “A figure stood with their back to me. Then a shadow slowly stretched out and consumed the back. The space emptied, and another back appeared. It, too, was devoured by the shadow. And then another, and another… That repetition imprinted something unsettling in my mind. At some point, a gap opened in my consciousness, and I saw a back that looked familiar. A sudden unease gripped me, and then I realized —it was my back. An indescribable terror overwhelmed me. I screamed and pulled away from the wall. The person behind me looked shocked, but I forced a smile, trying to pass it off as a prank. That night, I had nightmares about what would’ve happened if I had kept looking into that hole…”

“You would’ve been cursed.”

Even in the darkness, I sensed him nod.

“Curses are born from small things, like that hole. Ason must have looked into a hole somewhere and been devoured by it. *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* is about breaking curses. It piles curse upon curse, and the final part, *The Light of Salvation*, simultaneously creates and dismantles a torus that breaks them all.”

A heavy silence followed. Kandagawa cleared his throat and continued.

“But I’ve gotten off topic. I wanted to show you an exceptional performance. Until three years ago, a group I sponsored had a real talent—a prodigy on par with Ason’s wife. You’ll understand what I mean when you see her.”

The screen lit up, and a theater curtain appeared. It slowly rose.

The play was *Hamlet*, one of Shakespeare's great tragedies. Hamlet meets his father's ghost and goes mad when he learns the truth behind his death, waiting for the chance to take revenge.

"Here she is. Watch closely. She's pure talent," Kandagawa said, pointing to the woman playing Ophelia.

I stared, dumbstruck. Chills ran up my spine, and goose bumps covered my skin. Time seemed to distort, and I was completely immersed in the world she created on the screen.

Kandagawa was just as transfixed, watching the mesmerizing performance.

My breath caught in my throat, and I pointed at her, my finger trembling.

"She… Who is she? Please tell me her name!"

"Is everything okay?" Kandagawa asked, eyeing me suspiciously. But maybe my urgency compelled him to answer.

"Miri Yuzunoha."

My mind wouldn't work. I just sat there, staring at Miri on the screen.

She was pure genius. So much so that Chitose seemed mediocre by comparison. Miri looked elegant simply standing there, and her performance was delicate and precise, each moment a cascade of emotions. It was as if the audience's soul was entangled in the folds of a bolt of smooth, unblemished silk. Her descent into madness stole the show. Her eyes held a darkness deeper than anything this world could offer.

"She… Where is she now?" I asked.

Kandagawa stroked his mustache, his eyes tearing up slightly as he replied, "Sadly, she died in a plane crash."

On the screen, Ophelia, lost in madness, floated briefly in the river with her garland of flowers, like a mermaid, singing a song of prayer before finally sinking.

4

I came out of the long tunnel into a country of snow.

I could see nothing but white, and I found myself shaking.

No, this wasn’t a country of snow. Everything was white. The sky, the ground, all of it—a vast, empty void. A horizon stretching endlessly, without limit, continuing as far as I could see. I wandered aimlessly, my footsteps echoing like the sound of a lonely winter night. Gradually, I lost all sense of distance and balance, and dizziness crept in. Ultimately, even my sense of time became skewed, my mind clearing to nothing.

I focused on my heartbeat to keep myself grounded.

Thump…thump…thump…

Its rhythm was the only thing tethering me to this world.

Thump…thump…thump…

I walked for what felt like an eternity until I came upon a wall. It, too, was white—gigantic, like the end of the world. I looked to the right and left and strained my neck upward, but I couldn’t see the edges.

And there, right in the middle of the wall, was a hole.

I wondered if something existed beyond the end of the world.

I peered inside.

But all I could see was darkness.

Thump…thump…thump…

I blinked, straining my eyes.

Still, nothing.

I was about to give up when, suddenly, a white shadow rose from the darkness.

I screamed. But no sound came out. I couldn’t move, my hands and feet felt tied.

The mummy man.

Horror filled me.

His face wrapped in bandages, he stood there, staring directly at me.

In the next instant, he leaned toward me, and—

A pair of eyes open in the darkness.

The mummy man was crying.

I peered into that even deeper darkness, and—

I awoke with a start, lying in my bed drenched in my own

sweat.

Looking around my room, I realized that it had all been a dream and finally released the breath I was holding.

5

I entered a diner near the Nakano Broadway shopping mall. I grabbed a table for two by the windows and got myself a cup of coffee from the drink bar, sipping it while I waited.

A little while later, a woman with long black hair approached my table. She had pale white skin and dark bags under her large, round eyes.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I’m Mio Kashimo.” Her small voice was hoarse as she rubbed her vocal cords and cleared her throat. “I usually don’t speak much.”

She filled her glass with peach juice, then sat down across from me. Gazing out the window, she made no attempt at conversation. Growing impatient, I explained the situation: I told her the story I had made up—that I used to know a girl named Miri Yuzunoha, but we had lost contact. Recently, I saw her in a video Kandagawa showed me, so I decided to reach out to one of her old friends.

“Miri Yuzunoha…” Her eyes took on a faraway look. “There was no one like her.”

They had met when Kashimo was fifteen and Miri was seventeen.

“My first impression was that she was really cute. But once I saw her perform and talked with her, I realized how beautiful she was. The way she lived was beautiful. A person’s soul makes them beautiful, and no one in the world was as beautiful as her.”

She sipped her juice, enchanted by the memory of Miri, then continued.

“When I entered high school, I thought I was better than anyone. I was full of myself because I had won first place in the All-Japan Drama Competition in middle school. Kandagawa discovered me and got me into the Virgo Theater Troupe. I was sure I’d get the lead role… But once I saw Yuzunoha onstage, I was devastated. It wasn’t about her being good or bad. She was

frightening. Yes, that's the only way to describe it. I knew I'd never be better than her. I cried, resented her, even thought about quitting acting… But in the end, I admired her. A lot."

She drained her glass and went for a refill.

"Kamisuki, who is Yuzunoha to you?"

"Miri's cute, kind, a little clumsy, mysterious," I rambled for a bit, but then Kashimo gave me a blank look.

"Have you ever actually met her?"

I hesitated for a moment. Then, with more force than I expected, I replied, "I have."

"I doubt it," Kashimo said, smiling vaguely, almost mockingly.

"You might think you know her, but in reality, you just passed her by. You haven't really met her. And you never will. Because she fell from the sky and died—like a goddess who lost her heavenly raiment."

She told me she had saved some news articles about the crash, so we went to her house. The walk was unsettling. Her words, that I hadn't "really met" Miri, had cut deeper than I expected.

Kashimo lived within walking distance—in a mansion, actually. It was a geometric, two-story building, surrounded by a well-trimmed hedge and aesthetic lighting. The front door unlocked automatically when she approached it, and the lights inside turned on by themselves. An arowana swam lazily in a fish tank in the living room. We ascended an open-air spiral staircase to the second floor, and as we entered her room, Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* played in the background.

"It's always playing, twenty-four-seven," she said.

Something felt off, but I stepped inside. The air in her room hung heavy, stagnant. Photographs covered the walls. My eyes landed on one: Kashimo and Miri at Disneyland, both giving the peace sign. A wave of bittersweet emotion washed over me.

Kashimo retrieved a thick photo album from a bookshelf and opened it to the last page, motioning for me to come closer. I cautiously peered over her shoulder.

A news article about a plane crash was pasted inside. It detailed the crash three years ago, when a passenger plane traveling from Tokyo to Fukuoka crashed in the mountains of Gifu Prefecture. The crash was caused by engine trouble, and the airline and maintenance company had been tried in court. There

were no survivors. Miri Yuzunoha was among the names on the list of the deceased.

“When Yuzunoha left this world, I thought I would die, too,” Kashimo said.

I stared at her in disbelief. She flipped back to a page filled with pictures of Miri. She gently stroked Miri’s face with her slender finger.

“She died the spring she was supposed to turn twenty. Since then, I’ve lost the will to live. I’ve been seeing a psychiatrist and stayed holed up here until recently.”

Something felt wrong. I flipped back one more page, and it, too, was filled with pictures of Miri—as was the page before that.

A cold realization hit me. Every photo in the room had Miri in it. A chill ran down my spine. The album’s first page had a picture of Kashimo smiling awkwardly next to Miri, likely from when they first met.

“Yes, you see.” A thin, cold smile appeared on her face. “I love Miri.”

I took a step back instinctively. I opened my mouth, but no words came out.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, her expression unchanging.

“Yes,” I finally replied. “Having so many pictures of someone else…”

“Someone else?” she echoed. It was as if the concept of “someone else” was foreign to her. “These photos aren’t of someone else. They’re photos of me.”

I shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

“There’s no difference between me and anyone else. I am you, and you are me. Babies, the elderly, saints, murderers… We all have the same color in our souls. But people don’t understand that, so we still have violence in this world.”

She caressed a set of LEGO blocks in the back of her room, which formed a stage depicting the scene where Ophelia falls into the river. A sole spectator sat in the audience.

“Sitting alone in the dark for so long lets me examine my soul. I tried to discover its true nature and started ridding myself of all unnecessary things, like peeling layers off an onion.”

She began disassembling the LEGO structure one piece at a time. The seats disappeared, then the curtain, followed by the set.

I watched, frozen in place.

Finally, only Ophelia and the spectator remained.

“Most things in life have nothing to do with the soul. In hell, everyone is naked, right? It’s like that. And in the end, even that vanishes.”

I felt sick as Kashimo removed the spectator.

“Even the self is a stranger to the soul. What we think of as ourselves is not us. We don’t even empathize with ourselves. So, to me, Yuzunoha was more me than I was. She understood that, and that’s what made her a genius.”

“You’re insane,” I muttered hoarsely.

“You would have known it, too, if you had really met Yuzunoha.”

I fled. I bolted down the spiral staircase, past the arowana fish tank, and through the front door.

Behind me, the door locked automatically.

6

I turned off all the lights in my room and watched the video of *Hamlet* that Kandagawa had lent me.

The second time was somehow even more absorbing than the first. As soon as it finished, I immediately started it again for a third time. I couldn’t tire of it—there was always something new to learn. This cycle of endless discovery might eventually help me understand what Kashimo had been talking about.

I still hadn’t “really met” her.

Those words kept echoing in my mind. The more I watched, the more it felt like Miri was slipping away from me. By the fourth time, as I hovered my finger over the PLAY button, I realized I needed to apologize to her.

I called Saburou over. He jumped down from the catwalk and hopped onto my lap.

I looked into his eyes, and—

She gazed at the floor, crestfallen. My chest ached. I had placed another burden on the small shoulders of this woman with a fate already marked by death.

“I’m sorry, Miri.” I finally squeezed out. “I was upset and took it out on you. You have it harder than anyone, and I didn’t stop to consider that. I’m sorry for being so immature.”

Miri shook her head.

“No, I should be the one apologizing. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you about Kuroyama. Blindly knowing the future disrupts the space-time continuum, causing everything to spiral out of control…”

“Actually, I didn’t know anything at all… I met Kashimo today.”

Miri looked absolutely stunned.

“Mio? How is she?”

“She’s doing well, all things considered. Miri, you were an incredible actor. I saw the video of you in *Hamlet*—it blew me away. Now I see why you’re such a good teacher.”

She remained silent, her lips pressed tight.

“I saw the article about the plane crash, too. It said there were no survivors. Even if you don’t get on that plane, it wouldn’t change anything, would it?”

She looked down, absently stroking the earring in her left ear.

“No. I would just die some other way.”

I wrung my hands tightly and bit my lip. It was so frustrating. But I felt utterly helpless to change anything.

“That’s fate. I get that. I’m trying to accept it. I’m sorry I’m still so naive, but I’ll always be here for you.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she smiled.

“Thank you. Me too.”

I did my best to force a smile.

And in that instant, an intense feeling of uneasiness overwhelmed me.

No one survived.

I recalled what I had seen in Miri’s eyes.

The shadowy moon, the flames, and someone standing over Miri.

If no one survives, then how is someone standing over her?

A chill ran up my spine.

I racked my brain, trying to keep my smile intact.

The plane crashed in the mountains of Gifu Prefecture, most likely at night. The passengers must have died instantly. It was hard to imagine any witnesses or first responders arriving before they did.

Seeing her smile, I felt wretched. Even now, I still doubted her. It was a dreadful feeling.

But I had to know for sure. Thankfully, Miri had tears in her eyes.

I looked into her eyes, and—

The same tempest and confusion greets me. It's that night once again.

A burning smell reaches my nose. Cold rain strokes my cheeks. And the shadowy moon. Through a blurry world, the shadowy moon rules the sky, surrounded by a ring of flames. My life pours from my stomach. The memory threatens to fade, but I hold on to it tightly.

Someone is looking at me.

Who are you? Let me see your face!

The flickering flames glow on their face. They look familiar.

The person at Miri's accident is someone I know?

No. I know that face all too well.

It is more than familiar. I know that face intimately.

It is; it has to be—!

That person takes a step forward.

The flames illuminate their face.

My soul screams in torment.

That person is me.

Without a doubt, I see myself staring down at me.

Soaked through by the rain, he looks down in astonishment and fear. Then he bends down, shakes my shoulders, and screams hysterically. My ears ring horribly, and I can't make out the words. I gaze down at my stomach as life seeps out from it. A

small blade sits nestled deep in my stomach. The red jewels embedded in the handle flicker ominously.

And then Miri dies again.

I returned from inside Miri's eyes. She was still smiling, having just said, "Thank you. Me too!" Not even a second had passed since I looked into her eyes. Sweat covered my entire body. My heart pounded so hard I could hear it in my ears. My cheeks threatened to twitch from the strain, but I forced them to hold the smile. Behind that mask, my mind raced.



Miri hadn't died in a plane crash—she'd been killed by a knife to the stomach. And I was there. Had Miri and I met in the past? No, that couldn't be. I had no memory of it. That past didn't exist.

Which left only one possibility: I had seen the future.

That was it! That was the future! My heart screamed in my chest.

"You haven't 'really met' her"—Kashimo's words echoed in the back of my mind.

She was right. I haven't met Miri yet, but I will meet her in the future.

Because—Miri was still alive.

The dream I'd had last night suddenly came to mind. The mummy man—his eyes were the same hazel as Miri's. Could that have been a remnant of a memory? Maybe Miri had miraculously survived the crash, horribly injured, wrapped in bandages, but still alive. And that image had appeared in my dream.

Miri had lied. She had faked her own death.

But why? Until I figured that out, I decided it was best to hide what I knew about the accident. I would pretend not to know, working secretly to uncover the truth. Onstage, I'd play the detective Miri expected me to be, but behind the scenes, I would find the real playwright.

Miri and I kept looking at each other with perfect smiles.

Sweat trickled down the back of my neck.

7

After that, my entire life became a performance. I repeated my everyday routine as if nothing had happened. I'd sleep, wake up, rehearse *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*, and feed Saburou.

Miri could see the future—which meant, to some extent, she could *choose* her future. But "that death" still lay at the end of her path. If I wanted to help, my first step had to be interrupting her choices.

But was that even possible, against someone who could see the future?

I recalled what Miri said.

The future is constantly in flux. Some things will definitely

happen, while others occur at random. It branches out indefinitely… Even I can't grasp all of its ins and outs.

In other words, she can know the near future to some extent, but the branches grow exponentially in the distant future, making it incredibly difficult to predict the future. Like the butterfly effect—could a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil cause a tornado in Texas? Small changes in initial conditions could lead to tremendously different outcomes.

If that's true, then maybe there are futures that Miri can't see at all.

Also, I can see the future by looking into Miri's eyes. So, in a way, I should be able to choose the future, too. Miri once said:

Matters of life and death can't be reversed except in extreme circumstances.

But could "extreme circumstances" be created to stop her from dying?

My theory boiled down to this: Choosing a future that Miri doesn't foresee might be the key to preventing her death.

"Hey, Saburou, come here," I called, petting him. I snickered. I might be able to save Miri—just the faintest glimmer of hope, but I couldn't suppress a grin.

Then my phone chimed. It was a text from Chitose.

She wanted to talk about the shooting with the mummy. She added that this was our second date, so I couldn't say no.

But right now, I wanted to focus on saving Miri. I considered refusing and had just typed the *S* in *Sorry*—when it hit me. Wouldn't refusing seem suspicious? It might signal that something more important had come up, which could lead to Miri figuring out what I was planning. Plus, wouldn't spending time with another girl make Miri let down her guard?

I was too afraid to erase the *S*, so I hurriedly typed.

Skytree sound good?

Why Tokyo Skytree?

I wanted to bury my head in my hands, but I forced myself to relax and waited for her reply.

We both ordered lattes and sat together, gazing out the window. Under the blue sky, cars the size of raindrops moved between the buildings of a miniature cityscape. We'd ended up at a café on the three hundred and fortieth floor of Tokyo Skytree, after all.

"It looked like something out of a horror story. A mummy murdering someone," Chitose said.

"Seriously. It was hideous. Why would the killer dress up like that?"

"Maybe they wanted someone to see it?" A charming smile appeared on her face as she spoke. She wrapped both hands around her cup, sipping carefully so as not to disturb her lipstick. The red color stood out against her monotone outfit—a plain cut-and-sew shirt, black cami dress, and high heels. Gold hoops hung from her ears.

Feeling a bit out of sync, I replied.

"But why kill Kuroyama in the first place? What's the motive? And what's the connection with Amagasaki?"

"I don't know. All I do know is that both of them had COVID."

"Let's start by going over what we know."

Rehearsal started at nine thirty that morning, and the mummy appeared at ten fifteen, right before the climax of the prologue. We heard a bell, and Kuroyama was shot at ten eighteen. It happened in a stand-alone house in Nakameguro. The house belonged to his uncle, but Kuroyama was living there while his uncle was working in another city.

"The neighbors reported hearing what sounded like a gunshot at ten eighteen," I said.

"Wait, wasn't the room soundproofed?"

"It should have been. Kuroyama said it used to be a theater room, so it kept sound in really well. That's why he used it for Drama Club stuff. But if the door wasn't closed, the soundproofing wouldn't work perfectly, and sound could escape."

"That makes sense. The door was open, so the neighbors hearing the gunshot checks out."

"Speaking of hearing things, why didn't Kuroyama hear the bell?"

"I think it's because he was wearing noise-canceling headphones. He once didn't even notice his phone ringing right next to him until someone pointed it out."

“I see. You really can’t hear anything with quality headphones.” I nodded. “What about the mummy’s clothes? Were they from the Drama Club?”

“Yes. *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* was based on an earlier play, so we already had the mummy’s robe. Umeko made the mask.”

“I see. So Amou finished the script quickly because it was based on something else. Which means the killer had access to the Drama Club room. Who has keys?”

“There’s a key hidden in the geranium pot near the door, so anyone could have used it.”

“Okay. Third question: How did the mummy get into the house?”

“Apparently, the window in the first-floor bathroom was smashed.”

“So the killer entered through the window, put on the mummy costume, then attacked Kuroyama.”

I replayed the scene in my mind, and chills ran down my spine.

“If that’s the case, anyone could have done it. Anyone except the people in the Drama Club, since they all have alibis.”

“That’s the thing,” I said. “I can’t help but think the killer chose to do it during rehearsal on purpose. That way, no one in the Drama Club would become a suspect.”

Chitose looked stunned.

“Youichi, are you saying you think the killer is someone in the Drama Club?”

“It makes sense. They could’ve used some trick to make everyone think they were at rehearsal, then secretly killed Kuroyama.”

“Is that even possible?”

“There are lots of ways they could have pulled it off. For example, they could’ve rented a room near his house, joined rehearsal from there, then slipped away to kill him. Or maybe they broke into his house, signed into rehearsal from the first floor, and dressed as the mummy. Everyone would’ve been focused on the costume, not noticing someone had slipped away. Like misdirection in magic.”

“That’s a lot of possibilities. I’m impressed. But I checked

everyone's screen when it happened. No one was gone. You know, if we check the access log, we can see if anyone logged in from a different location."

She grabbed her phone and checked the log. Everyone had signed in from their home networks.

"Actually, there's one more simple explanation. They could've prerecorded themselves and played the video."

Her mouth dropped, then she laughed.

"Oh, I didn't think of that. Is that even possible?"

"The app we use has that function. I've done it before to skip classes where your face has to be visible the entire time. It's impossible to tell if it's a recording or a live feed."

"Wow," she said, looking impressed. "But you shouldn't be skipping class."

"Yeah, I know… Anyway, we should review the video to see if anyone was acting strange. I'm sure the police have thought of this, too, though."

"You never know. Let's give it a shot." She smiled at me.

9

We took a moment to admire Mt. Fuji and the Sumida River before leaving Tokyo Skytree, strolling around the station. Moving beyond our grim conversation, we chatted casually while checking out the nearby shops.

We ducked into a store selling retro-looking antiques, browsing through beautifully decorated clocks, stained glass lamps, and Western-style dolls with their blue eyes.

Chitose suddenly stopped in front of a painting. It was bizarre: A single left eye filled the canvas, the iris covered with white clouds floating in a blue sky, while the pupil, dark as a black moon, seemed lifeless.

It unsettled me. I couldn't look away.

"*The False Mirror* by René Magritte," Chitose said, moving to admire another piece next to it. This one was equally disturbing —a man and a woman, their heads wrapped in white cloth, kissing through the fabric.

"This is Magritte, too. *The Lovers*."

“Something about these makes me uncomfortable. What bizarre paintings…”

“That’s surrealism,” she said. I didn’t really get it, but I nodded anyway. She continued, “It feels more real than reality.”

“These paintings are more real than reality?”

“Fiction reflects reality better than truth sometimes. Who knows? Maybe this is what love really is.”

Her voice carried a hint of sadness. I didn’t fully understand what she meant, but asking might seem insensitive, so I kept quiet.

“Oh, it’s a replica, but they’re asking for thirty-thousand yen,” she said, looking at the price tag.

Wanting to make her happy, I offered, “If you want, I can get it for you as a birthday present.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up. “It’s in November. Don’t forget.”

She walked off with a skip in her step, smiling. I smiled, too, but then froze.

Hanging on the wall was something disturbingly familiar.

A knife with a golden handle, red jewels embedded in the hand guard…

It was *the* knife. The same one I’d seen in Miri’s vision—the one that had stabbed her in the stomach, ending her life. The sound of my pulse roared in my ears.

“What’s wrong?”

I jumped at her question. “Oh, no… It’s just so pretty.”

“Isn’t it? Both the blade and the handle are decorated. It’s not too expensive—how about we use this as the knife in *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*? I think we already have one in the clubroom, but this one’s better.”

My blood ran cold. I tactfully hid my face, pretending to debate it.

“Isn’t it kind of dangerous to use a real knife?”

She laughed. “There’s no way this is real. It’s a replica.”

A nearby sign confirmed the blade wasn’t real. Confused, I then remembered that even replicas could be deadly with the right material. People had died from accidents with prop weapons before.

This was bad. If I acted too concerned about the knife, Miri might figure out that I’d seen her future. I panicked.

“It’s so well-made it looks real. It might even violate the Firearms and Swords Control Law.”

I smiled to sell the idea.

“That settles it, then. I’m getting it—” Chitose reached for the knife, but I grabbed it first.

“It’s okay, I’ll buy it. I’ll submit the receipt for club funds later.”

My mind scrambled as I paid. I had to find a way to destroy the knife. Not just destroy it, but do so in a way that wouldn’t raise Miri’s suspicions.

We left the store and, at Chitose’s suggestion, headed toward the Sumida River.

We sat on a bench in Sumida Park, chatting, but my mind was still consumed by the knife. Maybe I could “accidentally” throw it away with the trash—no, that wouldn’t work. Wild ideas filled my head.

We decided to walk toward Sensoji Temple, crossing the Kototoi Bridge. As we crossed, Chitose spotted three blue-and-white flycatchers on the railing and said, “If your name fits you, there’s something I would ask, O, Capital bird: Is the lady in my thoughts still quite safe?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a poem by Ariwara no Narihira. He’s leaving the city when he sees a group of Eurasian oystercatchers, which are also called capital birds. Since their name includes ‘capital,’ he assumes that they would know what’s happening in the city and asks them if his love is safe— That’s why it’s called the Kototoi Bridge—the Asking Bridge.”

“Wow, you sure know a lot about this.”

“We had an assignment in elementary school where we researched the origin of our names. That’s how I found out about it, since my name uses the kanji for *capital*. It’s always felt a little bittersweet to me.”

She adjusted an earring in her left ear as it swayed in the wind. I felt a similar bittersweetness, like it spread to me, too. I wanted to ask the birds myself—ask if Miri was safe.

Suddenly, the birds took flight, startling Chitose. She lost her balance, and I reflexively reached out to steady her when a good idea struck me.

Pretending it was an accident, I dropped the bag with the knife

into the Sumida River.

“Oh no!” I shouted, leaning over the railing to watch the bag disappear beneath the water—a few ripples formed before vanishing.

“I’m so sorry, that was all my fault…”

“No, it was mine. I panicked and slipped. What’s done is done. We’ll just buy something else.”

I couldn’t help but smile under my mask.

10

I returned to my apartment and immediately looked into Saburou’s eyes.

As always, Miri appeared.

“I saw Chitose today.”

“For your second date?”

I hesitated for a moment before nodding.

“…I see. I’m glad you’re having fun, Yochi,” she said, though her expression showed distress. Seeing her like that made my chest tighten.

I changed the subject, telling her about my conversation with Chitose regarding the mummy murder. Miri nodded thoughtfully.

“It’s a simple trick, but I think it’s entirely possible. I’ll search for a future where the two of you investigate that angle. It should save you a lot of trouble.”

I thanked her and then asked if she’d help me practice. She agreed. We worked on the climax of the prologue from *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*, where Sunada Tetsu and Suzume cut their stomachs open with a knife and threw themselves into the Seiryu River.

Miri played Suzume, and I was Tetsu. As usual, Miri guided me through the scene, acting as my instructor while performing with restrained emotion. I stopped mid-scene, looking at her seriously.

“Miri, please don’t hold back this time. I want to see you give it everything you’ve got.”

If she went all out, she would surely cry. And if she cried, I could look into her eyes again.

She looked up from the script, her gaze meeting mine. Her

expression didn't change, but something fragile flickered in her jewellike eyes.

She nodded, understanding what I asked of her.

Miri took a deep breath, her shoulders sinking in a gesture of deep sorrow. She cradled the air in her hands as if holding something delicate, like a baby bird. The soul of a quiet night seemed to reflect in her eyes, and I held my breath.

All sounds faded into silence.

Miri spoke, her voice trembling like a solitary snowflake, fragile and fleeting.

"Then let us die together."

That single moment mesmerized me.

"We'll be reunited in the next world," Sunada Tetsu answered softly.

The two lovers strolled along the banks of the Seiryu River, the fractured moon twinkling on the water's gently rippling surface. The cold swell of the dark river seemed to resonate deep within their empty stomachs, and both shivered.

With every pause from Tetsu, Suzume glanced back, patiently waiting for him. She appeared otherworldly—her beautiful profile hovering serenely as she passed through the darkness in a graceful, regal arc, like a phantom flame. Watching her gentle, fluid, ethereal smile, Tetsu stood transfixed.

"The true terror of a woman…may just be her kindness."

Tetsu hesitated; Suzume waited. The sequence repeated three times before they finally stopped. They embraced tightly, confessing their love in a moment that felt eternal. Tetsu buried his face in Suzume's pale neck as though it were a warm, comforting lake.

Suzume removed a knife from her bosom.

And she plunged it into Tetsu's stomach.

I came back to myself with a start.

Miri's extraordinary acting engulfed me completely in the world she portrayed, so much so that I practically felt the knife wound in my stomach.

Having immersed herself completely in her role, Miri's eyes shone with tears.

Remembering my original intention, I looked into those eyes, and—

Time seems to stretch as I pass through the tempest of her memories.

I smell fire and rain and finally arrive at that night.

Looking up at the shadowy moon engulfed in flames…

"God…"

A voice speaks, filled with sorrow—Miri's voice. Things are different than last time. This time, she is standing, and her stomach is intact.

I had altered the future by destroying the knife!

Miri won't die!

My soul rejoices. But a darkness engulfs Miri's mind, as hopeless as a black hole. One that could consume the shadowy moon, the flames, even the darkness of the night.

With rough, panicky breaths, I look down, and—

I can't believe it.

I, Youichi, am lying collapsed on the ground.

A silver-handled knife is thrust into his stomach, and blackish blood pours from him. The lips on his pale face tremble. He reaches upward, desperately repeating "Miri… Miri…" He can't see anything, simply reaching out into the darkness.

I fall to my knees, grasping his hand. Then I burst into sobs.

"I failed…! I failed! I failed!" I scream over and over. Some highly elaborate building crumbles like a five-tiered pagoda.

"What was it for?! What was it all for…?!"

I see him—me—die before my very eyes.

My mind—Miri's soul—shatters, after which I simply scream wildly.

And then a gunshot.

Returning to reality, my heart raced. Sweat dripped from every pore, and after a moment of dizziness, I felt on the verge of

fainting. I managed to hold on, though, and gathered myself. Luckily, my movements didn't seem unnatural for someone who was supposed to have just been stabbed. Miri didn't suspect a thing and continued the scene.

Sunada Tetsu pulled the knife from his stomach and stabbed Suzume in return.

Miri's face twisted in pain—so convincing, so real, that it almost brought me to tears. My mind spiraled in a sea of emotions. Why was I the one dying in the future? Why had Miri been so distraught? What did she mean when she said she had failed? And that gunshot…?

I looked into Miri's eyes once again to find answers—

The shadowy moon engulfed in flames.
The rain running down my face.
My life spilling from my stomach.

What?

A whirlpool of confusion overtook me once more.
It wasn't me dying. It had shifted back to Miri.
And then the gunshot—

11

In my dream, it was still that night.

I lay dead before me, with Miri screaming wildly.

I jolted awake, drenched in sweat.

I processed everything in the shower. First, I had been dying, but then the future reverted to Miri's death. What could that mean?

I remembered what Miri had said: *The future is constantly in flux.*

An idea struck me. A hypothesis.

If I was right, it meant I couldn't trust Miri.

Every hypothesis needs testing. I had temporarily altered the future by destroying the knife that would have killed Miri. I needed to try the same again—find the silver knife I'd seen in her

eyes and get rid of it. Chitose had mentioned a knife in the Drama Club room. It was possible it was that very knife.

I turned off the water and rushed out of the shower.

12

The yellow flowers of a geranium bloomed near the Drama Club's hall window. I searched the pot, but the key wasn't there. I tilted my head, puzzled.

I sensed movement on the other side of the door. Turning the knob, I realized it was unlocked. Filled with a sense of foreboding, my sweaty hand slowly pushed it open.

Someone was rummaging through the props piled on the right side of the room. Their back was turned to me—it looked like a man. What was he doing? As I leaned forward, I accidentally bumped the door, causing the hinge to squeak. I startled. The man turned.

It was Amou.

Relief washed over me for only a moment before I noticed what he was holding. My heart sank. It was the same silver knife that had stabbed Miri. My eyes widened in shock. Amou's gruff voice broke the silence.

"You scared me. What are you doing here on your day off?"

I swallowed, trying to moisten my bone-dry throat.

"I… I came to practice my projection. I can't be too loud in my apartment."

Amou nodded. "Ah, so the bug's finally bitten you."

"The bug?" Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* briefly came to mind.

"The acting bug."

I nodded in understanding. That was cryptic.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I was hoping to find something we could use for *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*. Infections are rising again, and Kandagawa might back out someday. We need to be ready to handle this on our own."

"I don't think someone that passionate would back out."

Amou gave a faint smile. "Adults are constrained by many things. Sometimes, they have to admit defeat and walk away

from what they've spent their lives building. But still, '*Do not, for one repulse, forgo the purpose that you resolved to effect*.'"

"Shakespeare?"

"Shakespeare." He smiled—a perfectly warm, wonderful smile. His new Guri and Gura T-shirt was equally perfect. "Come help me."

I approached cautiously. From this distance, he could stab me to death if he wanted to.

"What do you think about this knife? It's perfect for killing, don't you think?"

I was terrified. But the next moment, he tossed the knife at me, saying, "For Suzume." Another cryptic sentence. I caught it, exhaled, and examined the blade. Its edge had been dulled.

"I don't like it."

I sheathed the knife and tossed it back. He glanced at me suspiciously before shrugging in resignation.

Together, we started sifting through the props. I kept looking for the right moment to dispose of the knife. As we dug through layers of items left behind by the Drama Club over the years, nostalgia began to set in. I found a picture of a Butoh performance and chuckled. Amou, with a serious expression, said, "That's art."

"Why did you decide to start acting? Was it because of your grandfather?" I asked, growing tired of the search.

Amou paused, hoisting a large cardboard box. "Let's see… I've been acting for as long as I can remember. Ever read *The Flowering Spirit*?"

"What's that?"

"It's a treatise on Noh theater written by Zeami. Looking back, I realize my grandfather raised me by its principles. It says to start children in acting at age seven and not tell them if they're good or bad—let them figure it out themselves. I naturally fell in love with the stage."

He stopped, his gaze distant. "My grandfather fell in love with my grandmother's acting. After she died suddenly, he never acted again. He always said, 'You practice for a lifetime; you shine for a moment.' Life's the same way—there's a moment of true meaning, and once it's gone, it's gone forever. My grandfather realized that when he lost her."

I paused, feeling a pang in my chest.

Once it passes, it's gone forever, and you never get it back.

"I was still a child then and didn't understand. I was just having fun, running around the troupe my grandfather sponsored. No inspiring performances like *The Maiden of Kissho*, but the thrill of the stage, the joy of acting—it was exhilarating. It was really fun. It really was—" Amou smiled, and I smiled back before going back to digging.

"Kamisuki, do you believe in fate?"

I looked up, surprised. He seemed serious.

"I do. I've felt it. When I first stepped onstage when I was nine, I knew this was the path I was meant to follow. I couldn't separate myself from the stage like I couldn't separate my body from my shadow. It wasn't a thought or belief. I just knew."

I met his gaze. His eyes held the certainty of a martyr, not someone detached from reality. They reminded me of Miri's eyes—someone who understood their destiny.

"I believe in fate, too," I said.

He nodded. "Kamisuki, you're part of my fate. That's why I gave you the lead."

A long silence fell between us.

Then I suddenly sensed someone behind the door. It wasn't the sound of it opening, but a soft fidgeting noise. Amou's eyes flared with anger. In a whisper, he muttered, "It's him. I'm going to get him!"

Grabbing the knife, he rushed to the door, flinging it open. "You bastard! What are you doing?!"

A man's baritone scream echoed, followed by the sound of someone running. Amou bolted after him.

A piece of paper was taped to the door. It read: ***One more rope binds the neck of the sinner.***

What in the world was going on?!

I followed in a daze.

13

I dashed into the hallway and flew down the stairs. Amou's back turned down the hallway. I followed.

A large, fat man wrestled with a door at a dead end. Unfortunately for him, it was locked. He turned toward us, then screamed and charged like a cornered animal.

“Wraaagh—!” Amou yelled as he met the attack like a sumo wrestler at the edge of the ring. The muscles in his arms and calves bulged as if sculpted. I stood there, dumbstruck.

Puffed up like a wild boar, the man buried his face in Amou’s Guri and Gura shirt and then immediately tore Amou’s T-shirt from his chest. What a pity, Guri and Gura were torn apart again.

“AAAaaaaaah!” Amou’s face distorted as he screamed, his hairy chest exposed. Then he tore the man’s T-shirt in half.

“AAAaaaaaah!” the man yelled.

I wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but an evenly matched battle was unfolding. They fell to the floor. The silver knife skidded to a halt at my feet. Two half naked men wrestled wildly, sweat flying. The man tried to get up as Amou strangled him from behind. He flailed wildly as his face, the color of boiled octopus, slowly turned purple.

—He eventually tapped Amou’s arm in surrender.

To drive the point home, I removed the knife from its sheath and held it to his throat, pretending like I had done something, too.

—We interrogated him once he had calmed down.

When Amou had said “It’s him,” he apparently had been talking about the person who had been putting up the pieces of paper. This was who had been taping up all those signs like *The Devil’s Troupe* and *God Sees All Ye Sinners*!

“Why in the world were you doing that…?”

Amou looked down as he asked, confused. It was hard to tell how old the man was, but he looked about twice our age. It felt kind of strange interrogating someone older than me. But he started scolding us.

“This is all your fault! You idiots! I was taking justice into my own hands as a private citizen! You even assaulted me! Just wait until you hear from my lawyer!”

He grimaced like a bulldog. He seemed really pissed off. Amou and I exchanged glances.

A summary of his nonsensical story went like this. Some heir to a well-known local company in Ibaraki Prefecture contracted

COVID. And that sparked the righteous indignation of this local resident. As a respected business, the company had certain responsibilities to fulfill, and the infection meant that they had neglected those responsibilities. Night after night, he stuck protest flyers on this heir's front door, but the heir recovered and went back to school like he bore no responsibility to society at all. This man couldn't stand that and followed the heir, taking the limited express Hitachi train to Tokyo. He went to check out the school, and wouldn't you know, the heir was part of a Drama Club, of all things! Something like a Drama Club in times like these, it was inexcusable! Hysterical! The height of impudence! He knew it was up to him to exact social justice, and even though he could barely afford to, he kept making the trip to Tokyo to put up these flyers.

"…I can't believe someone would do something like that in this century. Go back to your own time, you moron!"

"Amou, that's disrespectful to an entire generation. Go easy…"

"Moron?! MORON?! If anyone's a moron, it's you! COVID is bringing about the end of the world! And you're sitting here messing around on stage; it's absolutely useless!"

"Messing around on stage…"

Amou was stunned.

"You idiot!" The man pointed a finger at Amou.

"You idiot!" The man pointed at me.

"The world is filled with idiots! And I'm showing those idiots justice!"

"You're just doing that to feel better about yourself!" I was getting angry, too.

"No, it's all of you! Are you enjoying yourselves, prancing about and dancing onstage? Why don't you grow up and stop playing pretend? Society doesn't need people like you. Those two dying was the wrath of God!"

"You bastard." Amou had turned red. "You bastard, what do you know—?!"

Crap—! I grabbed Amou to restrain him. But he was too strong and we lost our balance. In that instant, the man screamed and rushed us, knocking us both to the floor.

He grabbed the knife and thrust it at Amou and me before turning and running away as fast as he could. I didn't have the

energy to chase after him. I was more disappointed than angry. You feel that way when you meet someone who hasn't learned anything important during their life. But at least I was able to get rid of the knife, however unintentionally.

Turning toward a completely exhausted Amou, I said:

"Forget about him. His anger was rooted in baseless fears and an inferiority complex. People like that can't differentiate between delusions and reality, and they justify attacking people in the name of righteousness simply to satisfy their own selfish desires, all the while oblivious to their base impulses… Amou?"

He was crying, his shoulders shaking. I couldn't speak.

"I… I…," he muttered through sobs. "I just love acting. That's it. I really love it. It's all I have…!"

The innocence of those words struck me. Tears swelled in my eyes. Looking at the torn Guri and Gura T-shirt on the floor, I reflected on something. In the way that shadows and bodies should be together, so it was with Amou and acting. He was born like that.

"Amou—," I said, scooping up the shirt. "*Do not, for one repulse, forgo the purpose that you resolved to effect.* No matter what anyone says, we don't have to stop the play. Look at Guri and Gura; it might seem like they've been ripped apart from each other—"

I spread out the shirt pieces side by side, with Guri and Gura together under one sky. They were separated now, but they would surely meet again someday. Upon doing so, tears welled up in Amou's eyes like in a Ghibli movie, and he wailed, "Kamisukiiiii—!" and hugged me.

I had no other option, so I hugged him back, hairy chest and all.

14

"So while I was working hard on the investigation, you were cuddling with Amou, huh?"

"Don't make it sound weird."

I had called Chitose while hurrying home. I needed to check how disposing of the blade had affected things as soon as

possible, but I also wanted to make progress on the murder investigation.

Panting between breaths, I said, “When Amagasaki was absent for two weeks, she had COVID. Kuroyama had it at the same time. Both victims had COVID. And I’ve confirmed a third member of the Drama Club had it, too.”

“COVID is definitely important to solving this case. Okay, I’ll find out who this heir is. I have a hunch, though.”

“Thank you,” I ended the call and walked into my apartment.

Rushing too much might raise suspicion, so I took a moment to wash my hands and rinse my mouth before calling Saburou over.

Then I looked into his eyes, and—

There stood Miri. Unable to hide my excitement, I spoke rapidly.

“There’s been some developments. We just caught the person who’s been pinning those papers on the door—”

I followed Miri’s gaze as she nodded along, listening intently. I wanted to dig deeper into her thoughts as soon as possible.

“COVID is the missing link connecting the victims… I’m so glad you found a clue. I also traced the branches of time and checked the results of your investigation.”

“And what about the people who can prove they weren’t using recordings during the incident?”

Miri hesitated for a moment before responding, “There’s nothing. Everyone either had someone nearby—family or otherwise—or could prove they weren’t using a recording.”

“What—?” That wasn’t the answer I was expecting. I stared blankly. “So none of them could have done it?”

“That’s right.”

“Oh, this makes my head hurt.” I scratched my head. “I need some time to think.”

I did have something to think about.

How could I get Miri to cry again?

Asking her to go through *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* one more time would seem too contrived, and she’d probably suspect I was up to something. I needed another way. If I were to cry myself, Miri would probably cry out of sympathy. Not a fake

cry, but real tears from the bottom of my heart. I needed to open up to her.

I kept the conversation going, thinking of a way to steer it toward a moment where I could say, “Miri, there’s something I’d like to tell you… Something I’ve never told anyone before.”

Then I began to explain why I started writing “letters from the deceased.”

“I was only eight when it happened. It was June. We had the day off to make up for a school event, and I was wandering around town. It was raining, but not enough to bother me. I was a carefree kid. Then I noticed a girl from another elementary school walking before me. She looked like she was on her way home with her red backpack, yellow raincoat, and red umbrella. A keychain on her backpack fell off. I rushed to pick it up, and that’s when—”

My hands began to tremble. Tears blurred the edges of my vision. The scene that had haunted my dreams… The dark hole that had trapped me in an endless curse. I knew that if I stared into it, I wouldn’t escape unscathed.

“You don’t have to go on if you don’t want to…” Miri’s voice was gentle, concerned.

“No, I need to tell you. I called out to her, but as I went to return the keychain, a car came speeding out of nowhere. The driver had died suddenly behind the wheel. The car sent her flying before it crashed into the wall of a house. I was fine. She had pushed me out of the way. When I reached her, she was barely breathing. I couldn’t do anything. I thought I could at least save her memories, so I looked into her eyes. And then—I saw my own face. My helpless face, frozen in fear, unable to move as the car sped toward us… I broke the connection immediately. The intense shame and the sight of that car terrified me. Adults arrived, pushed me aside, and started CPR. I was useless. I just stood there…

“That evening, fragments of her memories appeared in my dreams. I experienced her life—she had a best friend who must have been devastated by her death. Out of guilt, I wrote my first letter from the deceased for her friend. I’ve been doing it ever since. I read countless books and practiced writing to help others heal… All because I couldn’t do anything that day. I’ve been trying

to atone ever since.”

I sobbed, feeling like that eight-year-old kid again. Miri cried, too, moved by my story and the pain I carried. Her empathy touched me deeply. But the guilt of making her cry caused me to cry even harder.

Still, I looked into her eyes, and—

Emerging from the tempest of emotions, I descend on the night of the fiery black moon.

I see his body lying prone, a knife sticking out of his stomach.

The copper handle of a knife protrudes from his abdomen.

“Miri… Miri… Miri…”

“What was it for?! What was it all for…?!”

Then he dies.

A gun fires.

I mulled this over, my expression unchanged. The future was fluctuating. With the loss of the weapon, the future had changed. So if my theory was correct, then—

Miri spoke kindly.

“You’ve had it so hard for so long. But I think you can be forgiven.”

“Do you think that girl has forgiven me?”

She shook her head.

“The dead can’t forgive or hold grudges. Yochi, you’re the one who has to forgive yourself.”

That hit me harder than I expected. Miri always said precisely what I needed to hear.

“You’re right. At some point, I have to forgive myself…”

I looked into Miri’s eyes again, and—

—I knew it.

I wasn’t dying; Miri was.

15

Immediately after talking with Miri, I undressed and dashed into the shower. I ran cold water over my head. Miri could see the

future, but knowing her, I was sure she wouldn't invade someone's privacy, not even in the shower. I cleared my mind and began to think.

It turns out my theory was right. Miri or I—one of us has to die. It was fate. *Matters of life and death can't be reversed except in extreme circumstances.* But what exactly did "extreme circumstances" mean? Could it be that someone else had to die in our place?

This was it. Miri and I were trapped in a future where one of us would die. The odds were fifty-fifty, and the person who dies changes with something as small as destroying the murder weapon. But since Miri could see the future, she must be modifying it, choosing a branch where she dies. Suddenly, everything fell into place—Miri must be doing this because she feels responsible for dragging me into these murders.

The more I uncovered, the more mysterious she became. Why did she stage her death in a plane crash? Why try so hard to keep it a secret?

I thought long and hard about it, but I couldn't figure it out. And yet, despite everything, I still had feelings for her. I wanted her to live. I wanted her to laugh.

The memory of the girl who saved me from that accident flashed through my mind…

Ever since that day, I had been consumed by regret. She saved my life, but I could have saved hers—and I didn't. How many times had I wished it had been me who died? I wouldn't let that happen again.

To be or not to be—that is the question.

If one of us has to die, then I would rather it be me.

…But could I really die? I closed my eyes and recalled the touch of death I'd felt when I looked into Karin's and Miri's eyes. That sensation—the bone-chilling horror that made this cold shower feel lukewarm—was like a pillar of ice piercing my spine from head to tailbone. I shuddered at the memory. But more than anything, I didn't want that horrifying experience to touch her.

Still, Miri could see the future—how could I possibly outsmart her?

Maybe I could read her past through her eyes, use that knowledge to help myself?

No, that wouldn't work. When I look into someone's eyes from inside another's, I can't control it well enough. And the memories of death are so overwhelming that they'd draw me in, whether I wanted it or not.

The most reliable solution would be to find Miri and restrain her until I die. If I could do that, then even she wouldn't be able to stop me.

I turned off the shower.

16

I got dressed, dried my hair, and looked into Saburou's eyes.

Miri appeared, as beautiful as ever.

"Are you okay? You look sad."

"Oh—," I answered weakly. "I'm exhausted. Everyone's emotions, the past, the future… All of it has just made me really tired."

She already seemed on the verge of tears and nodded sympathetically.

"I know exactly what you mean. And you see the past in people's eyes, so it's even harder for you. Seeing more brings both joy and sorrow. I think it's the same for most people. When they think about the future, they get anxious about what will happen, and they feel sad about the futures that could have been. Thinking about the past makes the present hard, and they regret the pasts that never were. That's just human nature. Among the infinite possible time lines, there's no way the current you is the version you imagine as best."

I thought about a time line where Miri and I had never met. It might have been easier, without worrying about my death or these murders. COVID might never have happened, either. That world would certainly be better for countless people, including me. But just the thought of not meeting Miri made me feel sad.

"…Miri, you're going to die in a plane crash, right? Have you always known that? That must be so hard. I don't think I could handle it."

"Oh, you could. Anyone could. I mean, we all die sometime—"

Miri smiled sweetly, as if this world contained nothing to fear. “The most important thing is to not lose the present by getting stuck in the past or the future. Take a deep breath, then let it out. Then listen to the voice deep in your heart. We might say ‘no’ to life, but life never says that to itself.”

I sighed in wonderment. Her words felt so true, especially coming from someone who had suffered so much. I walked out onto the balcony, lifted Saburou high into the air, and faced the deep blue sky. A refreshing breeze blew by, and Saburou flicked his tail in happiness.

“What are you doing?” Miri asked.

“Experiencing the present.”

Miri giggled. “That’s good. Keep it up.”

“Is the sun shining over there?” I asked.

She picked up Saburou, opened the curtains and sliding door, and stepped outside. Just like I had done, she lifted Saburou high into the air.

“It’s sunny here, too. The weather is perfect.”

It struck me then—like Guri and Gura, Miri and I were under the same sky.

“Miri—,” I said, meaning every word, “I’m really glad I met you.”

“Me too. I’m really glad I met you, Yochi.”

We gazed at each other for a moment before cutting the connection.

I was relieved that my true intentions hadn’t shown. Just as I had planned, Miri had unknowingly let me see the view from her room. I saw Tokyo Skytree and the Sumida River! If I wanted to, I could now figure out where she lived. The challenge would be keeping Miri from realizing…

Just then I received a message from Chitose.

“I knew it! The heir from Ibaraki is Isemi! Let’s go right now. Meet me at—”

I couldn’t believe it. The address was in Sumida City—right near Tokyo Skytree and the Sumida River.

It felt like fate.

We gazed up at the building. It was an expensive high-rise, surrounded by elegant hedges and beautifully manicured landscaping. Looking behind me, I saw Tokyo Skytree and the Sumida River in the distance. Miri's apartment had to be somewhere nearby.

"It's an impressive building, but I don't like it! People should live with their feet on the ground!" Amou muttered, hands on his hips. We didn't ask why.

I leaned over and whispered to Chitose, "And why is Amou here?"

"Because as head of the club, he has everyone's contact information…"

Great. I could just imagine him inviting himself.

"Come on, let's hurry up!" Amou called, waving at us from the front door. We sighed and followed him inside.

We pressed the doorbell to an apartment on the fourteenth floor.

"…Hello?" came an irritated voice through the speaker.

"It's me! Amou!" he announced.

"I can see you on the camera… Why are you here all of a sudden?"

"There's something we need to talk about. Will you let us in?!"

Amou's insistence made me feel a little sorry for Isemi. A moment later, the door clicked open, and Isemi peeked out from the crack. I was shocked—he looked completely drained. His eyes floated under deep bags, and his skin was pale.

"It's kind of a mess…"

He didn't say anything more and disappeared back inside. We exchanged glances and followed him into the apartment.

The room was indeed a mess. Garbage was scattered everywhere, forming piles that resembled landmarks. Here was Uluru, and there the Matterhorn. A strange sense of déjà vu washed over me, reminding me of my own room during lockdown. Amou sneezed, either from the dust or the icy air blasting from the air conditioner.

I tossed aside some garbage bags lounging on a white leather sofa and sat down. The couch was too nice for the mess surrounding it. Isemi curled up across from us, shivering under a blanket.

“If you’re cold, maybe you should turn off the AC,” Chitose suggested. Isemi didn’t respond.

On the TV, *Pretty Cure* was playing. Amou spoke up.

“You’ve locked yourself at home to watch a girl’s anime?”

“No, it’s more like…background noise. *Pretty Cure* just calms me down the most.”

Amou tilted his head in confusion. I nodded and chimed in.

“I get it. When you’ve been alone for so long, those kinds of things can be comforting.”

I had tried to offer something relatable, but the lack of response was disheartening.

“I had *Sazae-san* on during lockdown,” I added, hoping to help, but again, silence. Chitose cut to the chase.

“Isemi, you had COVID, right? Did you know Amagasaki and Kuroyama—”

She trailed off as Isemi started sobbing.

“Ahhhh… Ooooh… I’m going to die… I’m next…next… Me!”

We exchanged worried glances.

Here’s what had happened:

Amagasaki and Isemi had been dating, but she had been seeing multiple guys. He knew and chose not to break up with her—he loved her. When COVID hit, he found out that Kuroyama was one of the other men.

“When I found out, I was so upset. I wanted to kill both of them…”

“What, you’re the killer?!” Amou exclaimed.

“N-no, but I understand the feeling!”

“So what you’re saying,” I clarified, “is that the killer was one of the other guys Amagasaki was dating, and he wanted to kill both her and her other lovers?”

Isemi nodded through his sobs. I sighed and sank into the sofa.

“I can’t believe it,” Amou groaned. “If you have time for this soap opera drama, can you focus on rehearsing?”

“Have you never been in love, Amou?” Chitose asked.

“I’m in love with the stage,” he answered sincerely. “A goddess controls all theater. If I cheat on her, she’ll leave me. No, I’m serious! Why are you looking at me like that?”

“But a jealous lover getting hold of a gun. That’s pretty likely,” Chitose said. “Next, we should look into those two blank weeks.”

My throat was dry. I got up, went into the kitchen, took a cup from the shelf, and filled it with tap water.

That's when I noticed something off about a section of the floor. The color was slightly different, and there were trace amounts of putty filling a large scratch, as if someone had tried to repair it. It looked like a knife had been stabbed into the floor.

Suddenly, a flashback hit me. I remembered Miri burning her lunch and rushing to turn off the heat, accidentally knocking over a knife that stuck into the floor. That was it!

I began wheezing violently. My vision blurred with tears as I rasped, "…How about we get some fresh air?"

I hurried across the living room and opened the sliding glass door. My heart pounded like a drum. The view I'd seen recently through Saburou's eyes came into focus before me.

There was no doubt about it. This was Miri's apartment!

I hadn't realized it because of the different furniture and the mess, but the déjà vu I felt walking in was because I'd seen it before—through Saburou's eyes!

I looked around the room, imagining Miri talking to Saburou. Tears stung my eyes. What I had thought was fate, was wrong.

This was calculated.

Like the Monkey King trapped in Buddha's palm in *Journey to the West*, I felt like I had been dancing in the palm of Miri's hand all along.

18

My heart continued its loud ringing. Despite the heat, cold sweat kept pouring out of me.

I walked back to my apartment with uncertain steps, like walking in a dream. Saburou slid up to my feet. Gazing at him with an expression bordering on fear, I stared down at his back for a while.

Then I steeled myself, picked him up, and looked him in the eye—

My breath froze.

Miri wasn’t at home.

For the first time, we were outside.

We stood before a familiar door—painted in a shade I called veggie juice green.

The door to my apartment.

I spun around and opened it. Miri stood there, right before my eyes, our hands almost touching. I could imagine the warmth of her hands, but Miri wasn’t really there. The warmth of her body didn’t exist. The wall of time stood hopelessly between us.

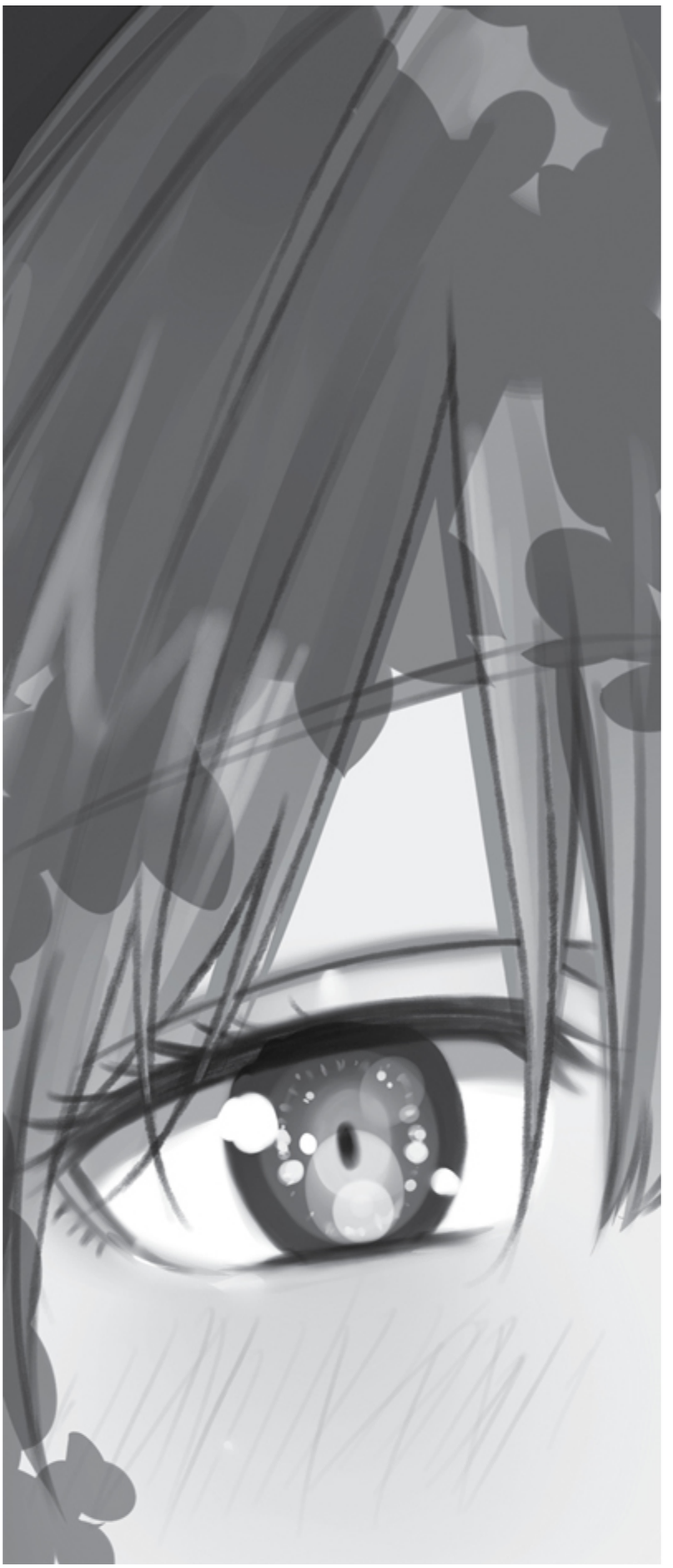
My heart ached. I could hardly breathe, feeling as though I might collapse at any moment.

“Miri…”

She was bathed in the soft light of dusk, an ethereal being cloaked in mystery.

“Yochi.” She smiled gently. “Let’s take a walk.”

We strolled together through the dimly lit town. The emptiness was eerie. Not a single soul passed by, as if we were the only two people left in the world. I understood then—Miri had chosen this particular future for our walk.





She set Saburou down on the ground and strolled with her hands tucked behind her back. Saburou trotted along, staying close. In her canary yellow flare skirt and white blouse, she looked radiant, like a vision.

“Yochi, you looked into my eyes and saw the future, didn’t you? You saw that I was still alive and realized that fate had decided one of us would die. So you swore it would be you and that you’d find me, somehow restrain me.”

She had figured it all out. There was no point in lying to her. I couldn’t find the words to speak, so I simply nodded. She turned, her eyes meeting mine.

“Why?”

We looked at each other. Eye to eye, through the wall of time. The evening light and the sensations of her brittle humanity flickered in her jewellike eyes.

My heart felt as if it was about to fly right out my mouth. But I had to tell her.

“Miri, I love you. With all my heart.”

My cheeks flushed, and I felt tears welling up in my eyes. Her lips trembled.

“Even though we’ve never met?”

“But it’s almost like we lived together.”

“Yeah, kind of.” Miri chuckled. She turned away from me and began walking. I chased after her.

“Why do you have to die?”

She was silent for a while as she continued. Then she finally said it.

“Because, Yochi, I love you, too.”

“You mean—?”

“Yes. I love you, Yochi.”

She faced me again and then smiled, her cheeks flushing as if she were about to cry.

Happiness swelled from the depths of my soul, but sadness balanced it out, making my heart ache.

“But why do you love me?”

“That’s a secret,” she said, pressing a finger to her lips. “I’ll tell you all about it another time.”

We continued walking along the banks of the Arakawa River toward the Goshikizakura Bridge. In my time, it was summer,

with leaves covering the cherry trees. But in Miri's time, it was spring, and the cherry blossoms were in full bloom, their petals dancing in the breeze.

"This world is so beautiful," she muttered softly, grief lacing her voice.

"Miri, I should be the one who—"

"Stop." Her voice was firm, final. "I'm the one who's going to die. There's no way you can find me."

I clenched my fists, biting back the words I wanted to say.





“Forget about me and live a happy life,” she said, her tone bittersweet as she touched her left earring. “You should be with Sakuraba. Marry her and be happy. You’ll have three beautiful children. Two girls and a boy. And you’ll live such a happy life.”

“With Chitose…”

“And you’ll be an incredible actor, Yochi,” Miri continued. “You’ll become famous for your roles in *The Maiden of Kissho* and *The Silvering of the Flaming Forest* in Amou’s *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*, and you’ll go down in history for your performance in *The Light of Salvation* at the Goddess House.”

“Me? That can’t be right.”

“It is, Yochi. You have real talent. More than me, so much more.”

Night had fallen by then. We stood beneath the cherry trees, gazing at the Goshikizakura Bridge. Lights illuminated the structure, making it appear to float in the darkness. Something Amou had said came to mind:

There’s a moment of true meaning, and once it’s gone, it’s gone forever—and you never get it back.

This felt like one of those moments. A mix of sadness and joy washed over me. I knew this would never happen again in my life.

19

That evening, I climbed into bed with Saburou and gazed into his eyes.

Miri appeared beside me almost instantly. The only light came from a small bedside lamp, casting soft shadows across the room. I couldn’t see much, but she lay there in her pajamas, smiling softly. Her cheeks were flushed, and the scent of shampoo lingered in the air—she looked freshly showered. In a whisper, she spoke.

“This is kind of…awkward.”

She buried her face into her pillow, covering half of it. My heart raced.



“I want to touch you, Miri. So badly,” I confessed.

“Pervert,” she replied, her exposed cheek turning even redder as she narrowed her eyes in a playful smile. “But okay.”

She took Saburou’s tiny paw in her hand, running a finger along the pads.

“Can you feel this?”

“Yeah, it feels kind of strange since it’s a cat’s paw.”

“How does it feel?”

“I don’t think I could throw scissors if we played rock-paper-scissors.”

Miri giggled. She stroked Saburou’s neck, and it tickled. Then she hugged him close, and through him, I felt the warmth of her soft body.

“I can hear your heart beating,” she whispered.

“How does it sound?”

“It’s really fast.”

“Well, that’s embarrassing…”

Her voice echoed in my chest as she gently stroked Saburou’s head. The moment she did, a wave of drowsiness washed over me—a deep, comforting sleepiness, like being submerged in warm, soothing mud. It was a sense of security I had never felt before in my entire life.

She kissed Saburou on the head and whispered, “Good night, Yochi.”

“Miri…,” I mumbled, drifting into a haze. “Don’t leave me.”

Miri sighed softly, a sad breath escaping her lips.

“I’m sorry.”

And as I drifted off, I swore I heard her voice one last time.

“Good-bye, Yochi.”

20

After that, whenever I looked into Saburou’s eyes, I couldn’t connect with Miri.

I cried silently, all alone.

21

I paced my room for hours, thinking.

How could I save Miri? No matter what she said, I wasn't going to give up. My resolve was firm. I would fight to the very end.

Either Miri or I was going to die. That much was certain in the process of finding the killer. Solving the case would guide me to the next step.

Which meant I had to figure out how the killer had done it.

Standing in the bathroom, I faced the mirror and glared into my own eyes. A core tenet of detective work is revisiting the crime scene multiple times. I would replay the memories of those events as many times as necessary to figure out how the killer had pulled it off.

I stared into the mirror, locking eyes with my reflection—

I fell, slamming my back into the wall. A strange sensation overtook me, and when I rubbed my nose with the palm of my hand, I found dark-red blood. My breathing was strained, and my mind was hazy. I had overdone it. What time was it…?

I removed my blood-and-sweat-soaked T-shirt and tossed it into the washing machine. I walked into the living room and checked the time. Three o'clock. Three in the morning. I had been staring into my own eyes for over twelve hours. The image of me gripping the sink, drenched in sweat and blood streaming from my nose, made me laugh bitterly in the darkness. I was a fool—a complete idiot. Miri must already know that I wouldn't give up on her. Even if I pretended otherwise, she knew everything.

Somehow, I had to devise an unexpected way to outsmart her. Something that would make even a changeling laugh.

The third tale of *The Elves and the Shoemaker* came to mind.

In the story, elves replaced a baby with a changeling. The distraught mother asked her neighbor for advice, and she was told to set the changeling on the hearth and boil water in two eggshells. That would make the changeling laugh, and when it laughed, the elves would return the real baby. The mother followed the advice, the changeling laughed, and the elves appeared, taking the changeling and returning her baby.

Two of the three strawberry milks Isemi had given me were still in the fridge, well before their expiration date. After drinking

one, my dizziness subsided, and my mind became clearer.

In the back of my mind, I replayed the images I had seen in my own eyes—

There were subtle differences in the scene before and after the moment when everything went black. The shadow of the decorative monstera plant—it was different. Slightly, but enough to be important.

I needed to verify some things. I texted Amou.

The day Kuroyama was shot, was the day special for any reason?

He hadn't read the message yet, which made sense given the time. I took a shower, got into bed, and fell asleep, almost as though I was fainting.

I woke up around noon with an immense headache. I went to the sink, spat up some blood, and drank water to calm down. After plugging in my phone, I saw that I had one missed call and two messages.

The first message was from Amou.

It was my birthday.

I grinned.

The second message was from Chitose, sent after I didn't answer her call. It contained a list of Drama Club members who definitely hadn't had COVID during the critical two weeks.

I called the families of everyone not on the list.

By two in the afternoon, under the bright sun, I took a deep breath.

I knew how the killer had pulled it off. And with that, I knew who the killer was. But it was all still just speculation. There was no proof—only what I had seen in my own eyes.

A reminder from Amou about Hell Camp pulled me out of my thoughts. The text explained how he had gone back and forth about whether to hold the camp, but despite the difficult times, he wanted to complete *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms* for Amagasaki and Kuroyama. His earnestness reminded me of Amou sobbing over his love for the stage. His words were so

heartfelt they brought tears to my eyes.

The text continued: The participants would be me, Amou, Chitose, Isemi, Umeko, Hirutani, Sugai, and Samura—eight people in total. Three days from now, we will take a ferry from Ariake to Tokushima, then board a bus to Tokushima Station, and then take a ride on the JR Mugi Line to Mugi Station. From there, we would drive to Amou's parents' house. All that would take most of the day. Then we would take a motorboat from Mugi Port to the deserted island where the Goddess House stood and begin our intense rehearsals. Just reading the itinerary made me feel exhausted.

Amou had also attached images of the Goddess House and a floor plan. It was a circular, mazelike building with a theater in the middle. A "bridge" connected a circular stage to a regular stage, with the circular stage jutting into the audience. The surrounding area housed lodging and other amenities.

Amou was eager to go, but Miri's vision predicted that a typhoon would cancel the trip. At first, I was relieved, but now I felt a little sad. I had changed so much in just one summer, and reflecting on it made me emotional.

Suddenly, a jolt ran through me. Somewhere, a changeling was laughing.

An idea began to take shape in my mind, sending chills down my spine.

The Goddess House would be the scene of the final showdown!

I quickly dialed my phone—

22

"It's starting to rain a little. Do you think we'll be okay in this typhoon?" Hirutani asked, hunched over with a pale expression, as we stood at the port of Tokushima after getting off the ferry.

"I didn't think it would suddenly turn toward Japan. But we should be okay… Though, I don't have any basis for saying that!" Amou laughed heartily, looking ready for vacation in his Hawaiian shirt.

Sugai winced and muttered to Samura, "What's up with the sunglasses…?"

“Pretty cool, huh? I’m like the Terminator.”

“What do you think, Umeko?” Sugai asked her.

She narrowed her eyes and replied, “Yeah, they’re pretty neat. I give them a five.”

“All right! Full marks!” Samura grinned, showing off his bleached white teeth.

“You idiot, it’s Umeko. You know she meant five out of a hundred,” Sugai muttered in bewilderment.

As the meaningless conversation went back and forth, Isemi sat looking dejected.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I put a hand on his back.

“I get seasick…”

“That’s right; you mentioned almost anything gives you motion sickness.”

“Even the kiddie rides at amusement parks make me throw up. The only thing that doesn’t is women…”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if you got sick riding that wild ego of yours, too,” Chitose said scathingly. That must have been the final blow because he let everything out into a plastic bag.

I backed away in resignation and whispered to Chitose as I walked alongside her, “All eight people originally scheduled to come are here.”

“That’s right. Now, off to lose ourselves in acting.”

Carrying my small suitcase, I boarded the bus with the others for the thirty-minute ride to Tokushima Station. The wind howled, tossing the tall palm trees wildly. After that, we took the Mugi Line for two hours to Mugi Station.

“What a charming station,” I remarked, admiring the small red-tiled roof.

“This brings back memories,” Amou hummed. “When I was in sixth grade, I bought the five-day unlimited Seishun 18 ticket and rode all over Shikoku.”

“Oh, wow. Such a wonderful memory of your youth. Back when you didn’t even have pubic hair.”

“I do remember washing my chest hair at Dogo Onsen on that trip.”

Soon, a HiAce van approached. Amou’s mother was driving. She looked to be in her late forties, plump, well tanned, and constantly smiling. When I shook her hand, I noticed the thick,

rough skin of her palms. She resembled Amou, with her arched eyebrows and Hawaiian shirt.

“Hey, you, long time no see!” she said with a touch of the Tokushima dialect. We all introduced ourselves. She commented on how gorgeous the women were and, upon seeing Samura, joked “Is this handsome young man Arnold Schwarzenegger?” and laughed heartily. Everyone except Samura doubled over in laughter.

The Amou house was a mansion, but the growing rain made us rush, and we hardly had any time to sit down. Photographs of theaters and portraits adorned the wood trim running along the room’s ceiling containing the family shrine. Amou paused and pointed them out.

“That’s my grandfather, and this is my grandmother. Wasn’t she beautiful? She was from Okinawa, so her features were quite striking.”

Ason Amou, Amou’s grandfather, had a stern look, exuding the soul of an artist. Amou clearly inherited his eyebrows. His grandmother, Yukie Amou, radiated a mysterious energy, almost otherworldly. Or perhaps that’s how I saw her, knowing the fate that awaited them.

Once we were ready, we donned our raincoats and climbed back into the van. As Amou’s mother waved us off, Samura gave her a thumbs-up, saying, “I’ll be back.” Umeko chimed in with a “That character dies.” No one laughed.

We drove down country roads in the middle of the storm. The wind picked up, and Amou turned the windshield wipers faster, muttering to himself. An uneasy air filled the van.

When we reached Mugi Port, we bolted for the boat. “Hurry, hurry!” Amou yelled as large raindrops pelted our faces. We ran past fishermen shouting, “Stop, stop, no one’s getting on a boat today!”

The pitch-black sky flashed with lightning, and a thunderclap roared loud enough to tear the sky. Hirutani shrieked and crouched down. Ash-gray waves pounded the sea walls, spraying us with water. Umeko helped her to her feet, and they both started climbing aboard. Amou turned to me, shouting over the storm.

“What do you think? Should we call it off?”

“Can we make it?!” I yelled back.

“Probably just…!”

Then I saw her—a small figure far off in the distance, wearing a yellow raincoat. She looked like a woman, walking toward us. I had a feeling.

“Miri…!” I turned to Amou and shouted, “Let’s go! Let’s do it!”

Amou leaped onto the boat, started the engine, and we took off. The boat rocked violently, and we all screamed. Hirutani was hysterical. “Stop! Turn back!”

“It’s fine; I got this!” Amou declared. I glanced back toward the dock. The figure in the yellow raincoat stood there on the breakwater, watching us.

I knew my plan had succeeded. Pushing through the Hell Camp that was supposed to be canceled, heading out to the island—this was where a new branch of the time axis formed, a path I had seen through Miri’s eyes. The typhoon would act as a natural barrier, preventing Miri from following. Plus, I would catch the murderer at the Goddess House. In other words, it would now be impossible for Miri to die, and my death was nearly guaranteed.

Miri had realized it, but she was one step behind me. The killer was among these eight people, and they would kill me.

But I wasn’t planning to simply let them. I would fight until the very end to change my fate. I wanted both Miri and me to live. Yet an indescribable sadness overtook me, and a single tear fell from my eye. I turned toward Miri, raising my right hand to heart height.

Miri, too, raised her right hand to heart height.

Act 4

1

We disembarked and climbed the hill leading to the Goddess House. The shadow of the large, beastly building stretched across our path, its strange contours illuminated by each flash of lightning, burning themselves into my retinas.

As soon as we passed through the double doors, someone screamed in the darkness.

“I told you I didn’t want to come! What were you going to do if we all fell into the ocean?!” Hirutani’s voice echoed through the entryway.

“You have my apologies—but with my experience, I knew we’d make it,” Amou replied calmly.

The chandelier suddenly blazed on. Chitose had flicked the switch on the wall. In the center of the entryway, Hirutani and Amou stood facing each other, their jackets soaked and hoods down.

“Hey, what happened to your sunglasses?” Sugai asked Samura, who sighed, looking disheartened.

“They were getting on my nerves, so I tossed them into the sea.”

“A wise decision.” Umeko chuckled.

I glanced around and realized something. “Wait, where’s Isemi?”

Everyone looked around the entryway.

“He was getting on my nerves, so I tossed him into the sea,” Samura joked, flashing a wry, toothy grin. Umeko smacked him hard in response.

Just then the door creaked open, and Isemi appeared, looking dejected. “Sorry… I had to throw up…”

We all breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The entryway was grand, with a crimson carpet covering the floor. A ticket booth stood to the right, and the central wall featured a large Chinese-style brush painting of hills and goddesses. We fanned out to the east and west to head to our individual rooms. Mine was on the east side, and as we walked, the trails of our wet footprints dotted the hallways.

"We'll have to clean those up later," Sugai noted.

The passageways in the Goddess House were complicated, with doors separating off several rooms. There were no windows, and it was easy to become disoriented while navigating the labyrinthine structure. I turned to Amou.

"Why did they design this place like a maze?"

"For the same reason they do it at Tokyo Disneyland," he said.

"Tokyo Disneyland?"

"They use embankments and plants to block the view of the outside world. It keeps the fantasy alive. This maze separates the inside and outside worlds, maintaining the theatrical illusion."

I nodded, understanding. Amou, excited by the topic, continued.

"And this maze has a supernatural purpose, too."

Suddenly, Hirutani let out a yelp.

"Ason Amou believed that theater was a supernatural process as well," Amou explained. "When an audience enters a theater and experiences a play, falsehood turns to truth, truth becomes falsehood, and they wander into a realm of both. They become engrossed in the story and fall under its spell. As they near the end of the play, that spell begins to lift. To enter into a maze means to die, and to leave it means to be reborn. Ason wanted the audience's souls to experience reincarnation while they were still alive."

He then turned to Sugai and added, "Labyrinths have been used for ages to ward off evil spirits. The bad things get trapped inside."

"I'm getting the creeps," Sugai said, rubbing his arms.

BAM! The sound of a door slamming echoed down the hallway. We looked around and realized that Hirutani was no longer with us. We had just reached her room.

Sugai shrugged. "Looks like we just lost a 'bad thing.'"

"Did she really put a curse on Amagasaki?" I asked.

“I’m very sorry to ruin the fantasy, but”—Amou paused before continuing—“she did.”

We exchanged uneasy glances and headed to our rooms.

2

Once I arrived at my room, I set down my bag and let out a sigh of relief. The room was a mix of different cultures. The coffered ceiling reminded me of shrines and temples, while the walls were decorated with mosque-like designs. Despite the blend of styles, there was a strange balance, a unified aesthetic that tied everything together. It reminded me of Ason Amou’s plays, which incorporated elements from Greek tragedies, Noh theater, and Chinese opera.

I thought about what Amou had said while I showered:

To enter into a maze means to die, and to leave it means to be reborn.

I already stood in the realm of death, and I fervently prayed for my rebirth.

After putting on fresh clothes, I headed to the central hall. No one else had arrived yet. I took in the stunning architecture, which resembled a giant sphere. A circular stage lay at the lowest point, with seats arranged around it like a bowl. Exits opened to the east, west, and south, with a stage and bridge to the north. Above, a painting of enormous flying goddesses adorned the ceiling.

I stood in the center of the circular stage and gazed up. Iron scaffolding and lighting had been installed in a circle, designed not to obstruct the audience’s view. Beautiful, arabesque geometric patterns decorated the center of the ceiling, creating an effect like the eye of God. A wave of dizziness hit me, as though I were floating. It felt almost like déjà vu, and a cold rush blazed through my heart.

Just then the door opened, and Chitose appeared. She caught my eye and smiled, her high heels echoing through the hall as she walked over to me. Looking up at the ceiling, she said, “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?”

Soon after, others arrived, and the space livened up. Sugai

stood in the center of the stage and screeched like a monkey, testing the acoustics.

“This is amazing! It was built just for theater!” he exclaimed.

“I can hear you all the way over here!” Samura yelled from the back row. Umeko, standing next to Sugai, looked on in wonder.

“Wait, Samura, how are you wearing sunglasses again?” she asked, incredulous.

He flashed his white teeth and gave a thumbs-up. “Backup pair!”

Umeko let out an exasperated sigh.

Amou soon arrived, and we began rehearsals. After warming up, we dived into *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*. Three hours of rehearsal passed, and we ate a quick dinner before jumping back in. A peculiar heat began to build inside us as we worked. Amou grew stricter, as though something had possessed him.

“No, no, no!” he shouted at me. “You have to act during the pauses, too! Do you know what the greatest invention in music is?”

I shook my head.

“—Silence. The greatest invention in literature is the blank page, for film it’s darkness, and for the stage it’s the pause. Everything exists within nothingness and darkness. Don’t forget that we act while staining time and space, ruining the greatest invention of theater!”

A few days ago, I wouldn’t have understood a word of what he was saying. But now his words soaked into me naturally, like water and light absorbing into a linen cloth dipped in a clear stream. Perhaps it was because I was already living in the realm of death.

We finally finished rehearsals at eleven that night.

“Well done, very well done…” Amou patted me on the shoulder, complimenting me. For a fleeting moment, I felt as though I had reached the level he demanded. I could still improve —or so I thought.

Of course, that all depended on me staying alive.

3

I returned to my room, immediately took another shower, put on my pajamas, and collapsed into bed. I was dead tired. My head felt like it had been impaled by a lead pipe, and my body felt as if it were filled with wet sand. Though my body desperately wanted to sleep, my mind was wide awake. The storm outside had intensified. After thirty minutes of keeping my eyes closed with no success, I turned on the bedside light and took out an anxiety med from my suitcase. I hadn't needed one since I met Miri…

Just then someone knocked on my door. My spine froze.

I looked around the room, searching for something to use as a weapon. I unscrewed the pole from the coat rack and gripped it tightly. It wasn't much longer than a rolling pin, but it was better than nothing.

There was another knock. Nervously, I opened the door.

—To find Chitose standing there.

She hadn't showered yet; she was still wearing the same clothes as earlier and her mask.

I relaxed and quickly hid the "rolling pin" behind my back, then invited her inside.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"…I was just scared," she admitted softly.

She stood there silently for a moment before reaching out and gently squeezing my hand. A loud clap of thunder echoed outside. Her dark pupils wavered.

"It's okay," I said, smiling despite my confusion.

"Thank you…" She nodded, gazing straight into my eyes. Then, without warning, she smiled and suddenly hugged me. I felt the softness of her body, and her scent was captivating. After a moment, I hugged her back, hoping to calm her nerves.

"Youichi, I really like you," she whispered.

"Thank you."

"But there's someone else, isn't there?"

I stepped back, startled. Her smile faded.

"How did you know?"

"If I couldn't tell by now, I wouldn't be much of a woman." She paused, then asked, "What's she like? What do you like about her?"

"She's—" I thought of Miri. "Petite, pretty, a little clumsy, really smart, loves to read, an incredible actor, mysterious, and always a

bit distant. One day, I just realized I had feelings for her. There's no specific reason. But I love her a lot. That's it."

"I see," A tear welled up in her eye. "I have to admit, I'm jealous."

She smiled, then pointed the "rolling pin" at me.

At some point, she had taken it from where I'd hidden it behind my back.

"It was for defense. I got it from the coat rack."

"You don't need anything like this," she teased, smiling as I moved to take the pole back.

But just as I reached for it, she pulled her hand back, causing me to tip forward.

And in that instant, she darted in close—

And kissed me.

I was dumbstruck. She smiled wickedly and said, "Gotcha."

"That was my first kiss…"

"Don't worry. It was through a mask, so it doesn't count. But I'm not giving up."

As she reached the door, she turned around, smiled, and waved, saying, "Don't forget, you owe me one more date!"



And then she left. A future existed where I could marry that wonderful woman… I pondered that as I returned the “rolling pin” to the coat rack. Her sweet fragrance still lingered in the room.

I debated taking my anxiety meds for a while but ultimately threw them all in the trash.

After turning off the lights and climbing into bed, I was soon overwhelmed by feelings of fear and loneliness. I shivered, freezing. I thought about Saburou and Miri, wishing they were here with me.

I recalled Miri’s warmth, the sound of her heartbeat…

4

I woke to a pounding on my door. Someone was screaming. I jumped out of bed. It was three in the morning. The storm still raged, and I opened the door to find Sugai standing there, his face pale.

“It’s horrible… He’s dead!” he stammered.

My eyes went wide. Sugai took off running down the hall, and I followed him. We kept getting lost in the mazelike corridors, but eventually, we reached the central hall.

A groan escaped me as I saw it. Above the circular stage, a body hung from a solitary rope. I slowly approached.

It was Isemi.

Water dripped from his hooded blue rain jacket. The rope was tied around his neck, and blood trickled down his forehead. The other end of the rope was secured to the protective fencing on the circular iron scaffolding used for lights.

“The third victim…,” I muttered.

A strange smell hit me. Looking down, I saw a pile of vomit on the floor beneath Isemi, and Chitose crouched nearby, heaving. Umeko, stroking her back, pointed and said, “She threw up when she saw Isemi’s forehead…”

Sugai scowled up at Isemi. “Someone drove a nail into the center of his forehead.”

Amou, Samura, and Hirutani entered from the west. Hirutani screamed hysterically and fainted, but Samura quickly caught

her.

“The storm outside makes it impossible to sail,” Amou said grimly. “So the killer is still here. And there’s no signal, so we can’t call for help.”

Silence fell over us as we exchanged uneasy glances. Sugai broke the tension.

“For now, we should take his body down.”

“No!” I yelled. “No one touch the body! Leave it until the police arrive. We could tamper with vital evidence.”

“Y-yes, of course. Sorry,” Sugai held up both hands to show he had no ulterior motive.

From the circular stage, Samura looked up. “How do you even get up to the scaffolding?”

Two sets of iron scaffolding followed the bridge from the circular stage to the north, leading to the lighting scaffolding. The whole thing resembled an old-fashioned keyhole.

“There are stairs in the wings that lead to a grated walkway, and from there you cross over the scaffolding above the bridge,” Amou explained, pointing out the route.

Sugai asked, “Amou, what happened to your left hand?”

“Oh, I sprained it,” he replied, smirking as he showed off the bandage wrapped around his hand.

“What’s a grated walkway?” Sugai asked.

“It’s called the catwalk. It’s used to manage curtains, lights, and other stage equipment.”

Amou and I made our way to the wings at stage left. The area was cluttered with dust-covered piles of junk, and thick ropes hung down in one corner. Narrow stairs made of simple iron bars led up to the catwalk. The sections visible to the audience had been carefully designed, but the backstage areas were sparse.

“Be careful here,” Amou warned as we jumped over a large gap in the path.

We climbed to what felt like the third or fourth floor and reached the catwalk. Metal wires and pulleys moved sets and equipment, and we could see the stage below through the gaps at our feet.

“This way.” Amou led us to a door on the southern side that connected to the area above the circular stage.

It was sturdy, with handrails, but the view of the floor through

the grating made my legs tremble. The lighting crew must have it tough. The audience would never see this. Six people watched us from below.

Once we reached the scaffolding above the circular stage, I said, “The rope is tied to the handrail!”

Amou knelt. “There are marks on his neck. His fingernails are black with blood. He was strangled to death.”

“Mark? Who’s Mark?!” Samura yelled.

“*Marks*! M-A-R-K-S! Signs that he fought back against the person who strangled him!”

We left the catwalk and gathered in the northeast meeting room. Hirutani had recovered from her fainting spell, but she was still sobbing. Chitose returned from her room, and we all sat at a round table to confer. I began.

“Let’s review what we know. Rehearsals ended at eleven last night. When was the body found?”

“Two fifty,” Chitose said. “Umeko came to my room around two forty—”

“I couldn’t sleep because the storm was scaring me,” Umeko explained. “So I went to Chitose’s room. She suggested we take a walk, and when we got to the central hall…”

Umeko began to shake.

“And then?” I asked.

“And then we found the body. I felt sick and threw up,” Chitose continued. “Umeko went to get everyone. Sugai and Samura were the first to arrive, then Sugai got you, Youichi, while Samura went to get Amou.”

“Okay. So who entered the central hall after eleven?”

“I did.” Amou raised his hand. “I was feeling restless, so I practiced my projection until midnight.”

“Of course, Amou. Someone of your caliber would…” Samura fawned over him while Umeko rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Chitose chimed in, “…It doesn’t seem like anyone else went in, so the murder happened between midnight and two fifty. Who has an alibi for that time?”

Sugai and Samura exchanged glances, then both raised their hands. Sugai spoke first.

“Samura came to my room around midnight, and we talked about movies and…porn.”

“Porn?” Umeko frowned. “You were that tired and talked about *that*?”

“Everyone knows guys can’t sleep at camp without talking about girls they like and their favorite porn stars,” Sugai said earnestly, and Samura nodded in agreement.

“Ew, you’re disgusting.” Umeko shivered.

“I—” Hirutani raised her hand sheepishly, speaking through tears. “I was with Amou from one until two. I was upset and couldn’t sleep. I told him it was too dangerous to take out the boat in this storm.”

“You don’t let up, do you?” Samura muttered. Amou shot him a look.

Chitose spoke up again, “Youichi and I were together from twelve until about twelve ten.”

“What?!” Umeko gaped. “What were you two doing so late at night?”

“Kissing,” Chitose replied casually.

Everyone stared at us in amazement. Even Hirutani stopped crying for a moment. Embarrassed, I quickly added, “It didn’t count,” blushing to the tips of my ears.

Amou cleared his throat. “At this point, we don’t have enough evidence to identify the killer. Let’s split up into pairs and search.”

“Pairs!” Hirutani shrieked. “What if I get paired with the killer?!”

“If you do, don’t let them out of your sight,” Amou replied nonchalantly. Hirutani sat there, stunned. We drew lots. I was paired with Sugai, Chitose with Hirutani and Amou, and Umeko with Samura.

We searched for an hour, then regrouped in the central hall.

Umeko and Samura found a steel wire about 125 feet from the shed.

With the discovery, Umeko suddenly yelled, “I know who the killer is!”

And with that, the battle of wits began.

5

“Think about how the killer could have hanged Isemi, and we’ll know for sure who did it,” Umeko declared. We all focused our attention on her.

“The killer had to pull the body up that high, so it must be a strong man.”

“That makes sense. It would be really hard to pull a body that high all by yourself,” Sugai agreed.

“Objection!” Samura yelled. “The killer could’ve used the catwalk to carry the body above the stage, wrapped a rope around his neck, and then lowered him down! It’d be tough, but a woman could manage that!”

“No, they couldn’t,” Amou interjected. “There’s a gap in the stairs leading up to the catwalk. No one here is strong enough to carry a body across that gap.”

“So the body had to be raised from below,” Chitose said. “How much did Isemi weigh?”

“May-maybe around one thirty,” Hirutani suggested.

“I think only a guy could hoist someone weighing one hundred and thirty pounds,” Umeko insisted. “The killer had to first get up on the catwalk, run the wire through the metal pipes under the scaffolding, then lower it down to the floor to tie it around the body. After that, they would have had to go to the stage and pull the body up. Once the body was suspended, they’d have to wrap the wire around the metal frame under the stage, then go back up to the scaffolding, tie the rope around Isemi’s neck, and retrieve the wire. Sugai and Samura have alibis, so that leaves only Amou and Kamisuki. And Amou definitely couldn’t have done it.”

She looked toward Amou, who removed the bandage from his left hand.

“Oh man, it’s all swollen and discolored,” Sugai said.

“We struck a giant wave while I was driving the boat,” Amou explained. “After rehearsals, it swelled up, and Umeko bandaged it for me.”

“Of course, you couldn’t do it with your hand like that,” Samura said, and everyone’s attention shifted to me. I broke out in a cold sweat.

“What are you trying to say, Umeko? That I’m the killer?”

She nodded sympathetically. With that, Chitose spoke up.

“There’s no way Youichi did it! That’s too simplistic.”

“Well, how could a woman hoist the body up?” Umeko countered.

Chitose frowned, deep in thought, her eyebrows knitting. Then she suddenly jerked her head up. “Follow me.”

We followed her into the wings, to the section filled with ropes.

“What are all these ropes for?” I asked.

“This is called the fly system,” Chitose explained. “It’s where people raise and lower the battens that hold the lights and curtains.”

Amou pulled a rope, lowering a curtain as Chitose continued, “Curtains are really heavy. This one weighs between one and two thousand pounds. The reason one person can move something this heavy is because of the counterweights.”

She pointed to a stack of metal blocks.

“What I’m saying is that there are several ways the killer could’ve done it using physics. For example, by tying one end of the wire to the body and the other end to themselves, the killer could’ve jumped down, or they could’ve used the pulley principle…”

“Of course…,” Sugai muttered, beginning to understand. “Some theaters have equipment to lift people into the air, right?”

“Wire harnesses,” Samura added, snapping his fingers. “Were those around when the Goddess House was built?”

“They’ve been used since the Edo period, around 1700,” Amou replied immediately. “I flew the actor Ichikawa Danjuro at the Morita-za Kabuki theater while playing Soga Tokimune during a performance of *Dainihon Tekkai Sennin*. You need to study more.”

“Sorry,” Samura mumbled, awed by Amou’s knowledge.

“I think this place uses an electric wire harness, but the wires don’t reach the body, so it’s irrelevant,” Amou continued.

“We’ve gotten a bit sidetracked,” Chitose said, “but can we agree that a woman could also be the killer?”

Umeko nodded reluctantly.

6

“Okay, now can we tell you about our major discovery?” Amou said, catching Umeko’s attention.

“Major discovery?” she asked, intrigued.

“We know exactly when Isemi died.”

“What?!” Samura gasped. “Amou, you even know how to do autopsies?!”

“Of course not,” Amou replied, looking confused. He pointed to Isemi. “Look, he’s wearing an expensive smartwatch on his left wrist. It can measure heart rate and sync the data to a connected phone.”

He then pulled Isemi’s smartphone from his own pocket.

“Whoa!” Samura exclaimed. “Where did you find that?”

“In his room. I had to break the lock to get in. But I needed to get past the phone’s facial recognition, so I dangled it from a string in front of him. It worked, even with a nail in his forehead.”

We all gathered around the screen Amou showed us.

“A heart rate error was detected at 1:21 AM. The watch automatically tried to call 911, but there’s no reception out here. Five minutes later, at 1:26, his heart stopped completely.”

“So then, Amou and I have an alibi since we were together at that time!” Hirutani beamed.

7

“Something doesn’t add up,” I said, and Hirutani turned to glare at me.

“What doesn’t add up?!”

“As it stands, no one could possibly be the killer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with me. I’ll show you what I found.”

I walked out the west exit, passing through several rooms toward the entry hall. I thought the shortest route might be through the south exit, but it turned out to be through the west.

As we walked, I asked, “By the way, where was Isemi killed?”

“Probably outside the building,” Chitose answered. “The killer called him outside, so he put on his raincoat, went out, and was strangled to death.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. “Yes, that’s what we all assume—”

We arrived at our destination, and Amou looked around, examining the surroundings. “What’s here—?”

“Look at the floor.”

“The floor? There’s nothing there.”

“Precisely. Something that should be here isn’t. The carpet in the entry hall absorbs water easily but dries slowly. Slowly enough, you can still see our footprints from when we arrived last night, so we should see other sets of footprints. If Isemi was strangled outside, then where are the marks from when his body was dragged through here?”

“Ah!” Amou exclaimed in surprise. “Yes, of course! So that means Isemi wasn’t killed outside! So then, why is his body wet?”

“Don’t ask why his body is wet. Ask where it got wet,” I said. “The Goddess House doesn’t have any windows, and if he didn’t pass through the front door, then it wasn’t from the rain. Which means the only explanation is a faucet. Every room has a shower. The killer purposely got the body wet, brought it to the central hall, and hung it up. Look at this.”

I opened a floor plan of the Goddess House.

“This shaded area shows where the carpeted floors are. The material doesn’t dry quickly, so dragging a body would’ve left marks. There are ways the killer could’ve avoided leaving a trail, like using a water bottle to splash water on the body after dragging it or setting down a plastic sheet to drag it across. But since there are no marks in the entry hall, it’s reasonable to assume they didn’t consider the carpets at all. Which leaves only two people who could have dragged the body without passing through a carpeted area—Samura and Hirutani.”

Everyone looked at them. Samura swallowed hard, and Hirutani twitched.

“But,” I continued. “Sugai was with Samura from midnight until the body was discovered, so he’s definitely not the killer. That leaves Hirutani.”

“That’s impossible!” she yelled. “When Isemi’s heart stopped, I was with Amou! Right?” She looked around, pleading. Everyone looked confused.

“It’s possible,” I said. “You knew Isemi wore a smartwatch and used that to your advantage. You manipulated his time of death. And I’ll prove it right now!”

8

We moved to the central hall, and I began to elaborate.

“You called Isemi to your room, attacked him from behind, and suffocated him. That’s how the marks appeared on his neck. But you didn’t kill him then—you only knocked him out. To make it look like he had been murdered outside, you put his rain jacket on him and used your shower to get him wet. You then dragged him to the central hall and drove a nail into his forehead. However, you made sure the wound wasn’t fatal, perhaps to obscure his actual time of death. Then you tied the rope to the metal wire, looped the noose around his neck, ran the rope through the iron pipe in the scaffolding on the ceiling, and tied the other end to the steel frame around the circular stage.”

I brought out a mannequin from the stage right wings to use as a stand-in for Isemi and looped a noose around its neck.

“That’s the time line of how you did it. Everything else was straightforward. Come with me—”

We exited through the south door, climbed some stairs, and entered a room with a large window overlooking the stage. The room also contained several control boards with knobs and levers.

“Every light and sound effect in the theater can be operated from this control room. Everything here is pretty old, but some of them still function. Ason Amou used things like rotating stages and trapdoors to great effect in his plays. I remembered that and examined this room. Just as I suspected—the stage can rotate.”

I turned a knob on the control board.

Everyone gasped.

A sound accompanied the stage as it turned. I increased the rotational speed. As the stage rotated, the steel wire wound and the mannequin slowly lifted into the air until it dangled above the stage.

“You set the rotational speed and then went to meet Amou. The wire gradually wound, lifting Isemi into the air—and ending his life. When the right time came, you returned, making sure we found Isemi in the position we did.”

Hirutani trembled. She had turned deathly pale and was

drenched in sweat.

“That’s just speculation!” she spat. In the next moment, she gave a dreadful expression and screamed. “Speculation! You have no proof of any of that! You won’t pin this on me!”

I let a moment pass before replying coolly, “Let’s return to the question of why the killer got the body wet. It was important for the killer to make it look like Isemi was murdered outside. Why? Perhaps because there was irrefutable proof inside their room that they couldn’t get rid of—”

We all exchanged glances before rushing to Hirutani’s room.

A wild look crossed her face, and she screamed, unhinged. “Stop! There’s nothing there! Nothing!”

The door was locked. Amou demanded, “—Key!”

Hirutani shook her head, refusing. Amou began forcefully kicking the door.

“Stop! There’s nothing there! Nothing! Not a thing! There’s nothing!” Hirutani cried hysterically.

With several powerful kicks, the door gave way.

We all held our breath as we entered.

Straw dolls hung from nails on the opposite wall. Amou swallowed hard and began removing them. Then—

“They’re here! Scratch marks! And blood! Absolute proof!”

“Nobody move!”

Turning around, Hirutani was pointing the barrel of a gun toward us. Samura was stunned.

“The M360J Sakura!”

She pointed the pistol in his direction, and he screamed. She hit Chitose with the butt of the gun, knocking her to the floor.

“Chitose!” I yelled.

“It was all Isemi’s fault!” Hirutani howled wildly. “He had other girls, but he still tried to get with me and even gave me COVID! He deserved to die! He should die! Everyone should die! Die! Die! Die! Die!”

With each scream of the word *die*, she pointed the pistol at another one of us. And the blood drained from my face when I looked down that barrel.

She screamed hysterically and fled the room. We stayed frozen for a moment, hands in the air. I knelt down by Chitose.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” She held her right eye as she answered.

“What an absolute psychopath,” Sugai muttered. “What do we do now?”

“We’d best stay here for now. Let’s see what happens.”

Amou still had his hands in the air as he uttered those words.

9

After a while, Sugai spoke.

“Do you smell something burning?”

“Yeah…” Umeko sniffed.

As she said that, gray smoke billowed across the ceiling and into the room. “Ah!” Amou screamed. We ran down the hall. Flames were rising down the right side of the hallway. The floor was a sea of fire. The walls were burning, and the flames almost licked the ceiling. In the direction of the fire, Hirutani stood, flailing her hair wildly. She screamed in a terrifying voice.

“Die! Die! Everyone, die!”

“You murderer!” Sugai yelled, dashing forward, but the flames blocked his path.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Hirutani laughed maniacally, craning her head back as she disappeared around the corner.

“This is bad! If she set the entrance hall on fire, we won’t be able to escape!” Amou shouted, sweat trickling down his forehead. “This way!”

We ran. Amou opened a door, but flames blasted out, forcing him to slam it shut quickly. “We have to go around!”

We kept running. When we finally reached the entrance hall, we stopped dead. The crimson carpet had turned into a sea of flames. The fire roared, consuming everything in its path. The giant goddesses in the painting looked like they were trapped in the hells of Tapana and Avici from Buddhist mythology.

“Back! Go back!” Amou shouted, turning as flames licked his back.

“Are there any other exits?!” I yelled.

“No!” Amou yelled back. “None! We have to put out the fire!”

He ran, and we followed. The Goddess House was turning into a burning hellscape.

“Don’t breathe in the smoke!” Samura shouted.

At a fork in the path, Amou yelled, “Women, head to the central hall! Men, get the fire extinguishers!”

The women nodded and ran toward the central hall. The men turned northeast. As we ran, Samura suddenly shouted, “I saw a fire extinguisher in a room over this way! I’ll go get it!”

“Don’t, Samura! It’s too dangerous!” Amou shouted back.

“Even one more fire extinguisher could help!” Samura pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket, gave us a thumbs-up, and said, “I’ll be back!” before darting off into the flames.

“Samura, you idiot!”

“Let’s hurry!” I urged, shoving Amou forward.

We reached the supply closet and yanked open the metal door. “This way!” We rushed inside. Three large, thirteen-pound fire extinguishers sat in the shadows.

“All right!” Sugai shouted, pumping his fist.

Just then the door slammed shut.

“No!” Amou threw himself at the door. “We’re locked in!”

He shook the doorknob and hurled his body against the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

“Move!” Sugai shouted, slamming the bottom of the fire extinguisher against the door. I joined him, but the door held firm. “Dammit!” Sugai hurled his fire extinguisher at the door, panting as tears welled up in his eyes. “We’re going to be roasted alive!”

“Smoke’s coming in!” I yelled.

“We can block it with this!” Amou shouted, ripping off his shirt and stuffing it into the crack at the top of the door. Sugai helped, coughing as he yelled for help.

Suddenly, the door swung open, and Amou and Sugai tumbled forward.

Samura stood on the other side, holding a fire extinguisher.

“Come with me if you want to live.”

Samura grinned. A mixture of emotions passed over Sugai’s face as he yelled, “Thank you, Terminator!”

We stood up, grabbed the fire extinguishers, and bolted. As

soon as we reached Sugai's room, however, we stopped.

Something was burning.

Something in the shape of a person.

Sugai scooped up the black lump on the ground next to him. "A real gun," he said. "So this is how it ends for that psycho…"

"That'll be us soon enough!" Amou said, and tossed a T-shirt to Sugai. "Get this wet and use it to cover your mouth!"

Sugai nodded, unlocked the door, and rushed inside.

The rest of us exchanged a quick glance and ran.

When we reached the central hall, Chitose approached me, her face full of concern.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, everything went as well as it could."

"Oh, my chest hair is singed all the way to my belly button…," Amou muttered.

Umeko stood up from the monitor she'd been watching and jumped in delight.

"Yes! We got it! And the video is perfect!"

"Our plan worked!"

Amou celebrated. We cheered and clapped.

I looked up at the ceiling. Nothing hung there anymore. I smiled and said:

"Good job, Isemi."

His face pale, he raised his right hand while drinking from a water bottle.

"I can't believe it. Even just hanging there made you sick," Chitose said. "I really panicked."

"So that was Isemi's vomit, after all?" I asked.

"Yeah. I had to make it look like I did it."

"I thought my heart was going to stop," Isemi said, removing the nail from his forehead and flicking it away.

"Hirutani, you were something else. I knew you couldn't shoot me, but I was really scared when you pointed the gun at me."

"Heh-heh-heh, thank you. It's been a while since I got into a role like that." She laughed endearingly at the compliment.

Just then the east exit opened, and—

“Hey, guys, we’ve got to get out of here!” Sugai rushed in, worried. He didn’t notice anything strange as he approached the stage. “What are you doing?! Hurry!”

Then he saw Hirutani and screamed, finally noticing his surroundings. His jaw dropped as he caught sight of Isemi.

“What’s going on…? What is this? Hey!”

He jumped onto the circular stage, frantically looking around and clutching his head.

“What is this? What in the world…?!”

I walked onto the stage and faced him. Sugai screamed again.

“The fire has surrounded us! We have to get out of here now!”

“Ason Amou built the Goddess House specifically for *The Maiden of Kissho*.” Amou’s robust voice echoed through the room. “In the final scene, sunlight pours into the theater from the center of the ceiling, and in that infinite light, the goddess brings the healing light of Buddha, re-creating salvation.”

He raised his right hand, and at his signal, a heavy thudding sound rang out above our heads. The arabesque-patterned ceiling shook as it separated into six pieces, revealing the night sky through a perfect circle.

The worst of the storm had passed, and the wind had died down. A cold rain fell, soaking Sugai and me.

“We’ll be okay for a while,” Amou declared.

I took a deep breath and exhaled.

Finally, I said, “Let’s talk.”

10

The Goddess House would be the scene of the final showdown!

Holding Hell Camp in the middle of the storm would make that happen. Once I realized this, I called Amou and asked him to meet with me. His help would be indispensable in making the plan work.

I went to Amou’s room, with its eclectic decorations—tengu masks, a Star Wars poster, and a scroll that said MASTER THYSELF—and relayed my suspicions to him.

“At first, I thought the killer had played a prerecorded video to create an alibi while they killed Kuroyama. But no one was

playing a video during the murder, so I abandoned that theory. Then I remembered something. Something was off right before and right after the mummy covered the camera—the shadow of the monstera plant had changed. The angle of the light from the window was different. That means the video before the screen went dark was from a different time of day than the video after it went dark. Kuroyama was the one using a prerecorded video."

It had taken me hundreds of replays in my mind to realize it, but I didn't mention that.

"Let's review the time line of events. Sometime before the murder, Kuroyama and the killer prerecorded the scene before the screen went dark. Then, on the day of the murder, during rehearsals, the killer switched their feed to a video and went to Kuroyama's house. We were all focused on the actors, so no one noticed. Once the killer arrived at Kuroyama's, he also switched his feed to a video."

Amou looked confused, so I continued.

"The killer changed into the mummy costume and killed Kuroyama. The soundproof door was closed, so the neighbors wouldn't hear the gunshot. After the screen went black, the killer connected the two videos—the one showing Kuroyama sitting there, and the second showing the mummy. Together, they created one continuous video. The killer also set up audio equipment in the room to play a gunshot sound. Afterward, the killer left Kuroyama's house, leaving the soundproof door open, and played along with the prerecorded video to create their alibi. The gunshot the neighbors heard was a recording."

"Hold on a second. What are you talking about? Why would Kuroyama help the killer?"

"It was your birthday."

Amou looked bewildered, so I explained further.

"I think Kuroyama wanted to surprise you. By having a mummy appear and creating a commotion, he could trick you into thinking his screen had gone black so he could disappear. Then he would ring your doorbell, and when you opened the door, you'd find Kuroyama standing there with a bouquet of flowers and a present. That's what I think the plan was."

"Kuroyama…" Amou's eyes misted over. "Of course, that explains it!"

He pulled a small, neatly wrapped box from a drawer. Kuroyama's parents had given it to him on the day of the funeral.

"I never got around to opening it…"

He carefully untied the ribbon and removed the wrapping paper, opening the lid with shaking hands. Inside was a letter and a beautiful paulownia wood box. He read the letter aloud:

"Happy birthday! I'm overjoyed to see The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms come to life. I'm going to do everything in my power to make it the best. You're going to be famous someday, so use this to practice your signature. It was made special!"

Opening the box, he found a beautiful calligraphy pen adorned with a gold-lacquered goddess. Tears flowed from Amou's eyes.

"At the time, Kuroyama's feed must have been a prerecorded video, and it looked like he glanced back when Sugai said 'Behind you!' We can assume Sugai was playing along to match the timing of the video. Also, I had a list of everyone who didn't have COVID during the two blank weeks. I called the parents of every club member who wasn't on the list, pretending to be someone from the Public Health Center. When I did, I discovered that Sugai had COVID during that time, too."

"Sugai," Amou muttered. "He would be the guy Kuroyama would ask to help with a surprise."

"I checked social media and contacted Sugai's high school friends. I confirmed he dated Amagasaki in high school. They probably kept dating after Amagasaki started university, but when Sugai realized she was seeing other men, hatred overtook him. Finding that gun at Shinjuku Station was the straw that broke the camel's back."

Looking back, Sugai chatting online with me during the first murder was probably him creating an alibi, while also getting an idea of what I was doing next door. Two birds with one stone.

"I'm almost certain Sugai is the killer. But there's no proof. There might still be video data on Kuroyama's computer, but it's probably been deleted automatically by now."

"You're right; there's no proof. That's why we have to make some." I spread out an expanded floor plan for the Goddess House. "The killer set it up so the murder scene would start immediately after the lines 'I've killed one person, and now fate calls me to kill more!' Your play notes are so rigidly constructed

for tempo that it's possible to time it to the play. Because this is an allusion to a series of murders, Isemi is likely to be the next victim. That's why *we're going to kill him first*."

I laid out my plan to a stunned Amou.

"Once someone else has 'killed' his next target, Sugai will start thinking about getting rid of the gun. We'll create the perfect opportunity for him to do so, record it, and then retrieve the gun ourselves. That will be our proof. But there's one problem—there's no guarantee Sugai will bring the gun to the Goddess House."

Oh—I hadn't considered that. I knew from Miri's vision that there would be a gunshot, so I was sure the gun would be there. But Amou's point made me pause.

After some internal debate, I told Amou everything about my ability and Miri. It took at least an hour. When I finished, Amou sat holding his head, bewildered.

"There's no way I could just suddenly believe something like that. But it's too outlandish and detailed to be a lie. Fine, I want you to look into my eyes and tell me Ason Amou's dying words. It's something that only I know."

"Okay." I nodded. "Concentrate on that moment."

He closed his eyes, his eyelids flickering. Then tears rolled down his cheeks as he opened his eyes.

I looked into Amou's eyes and said, "'Burn down the Goddess House.' That's what he told everyone around him. Your father ran to call a doctor, but you were the only one who heard the rest. He said, 'Yukie and I are going to perform *The Maiden of Kissho* in the afterlife.'"

Amou whispered, his voice quavering, "That's it. Everyone else only heard the first part, so people thought he'd given up. But it was the opposite. Do you know about Uchikabi money that Okinawans offer to the dead? Burning paper money sends it to the afterlife as smoke. My grandma was from Okinawa. He wanted to burn the Goddess House and perform the play *over there*. That's how much he loved her and performing. She died by suicide because the vocal cord polyp she developed stopped her from ever performing again, so they were the same in that regard."

"Oh, I didn't know."

The truth often gets twisted. Amou spoke again.

“I believe you now. It’s time to write the script.”

We then lost ourselves in planning. Creating something with a genius like Shimao Amou—it gave me goose bumps.

First, we would discover Isemi’s body hanging by a noose. He would, of course, be alive, but Umeko would use makeup to make him look dead. A wire would be threaded into the rope and attached to a harness so his neck wouldn’t bear any weight.

“Since it’ll be summer, won’t the harness show if he’s in shorts and a T-shirt?”

“Right, so we’ll have to have put him in a rain jacket. We can figure out how to explain that later.”

Then we started working on theories and ways to prove alibis.

“I’ll sprain my left wrist so it’s impossible for me to have strung up the body. We’ll have Umeko do the makeup for that.”

We thoroughly enjoyed devising alibis and schemes. I came up with the idea of using the smartwatch for the time of death. All we had to do was use editing software to change the numbers on the screen.

“And in the end, a cornered Hirutani pulls out a model gun and sets the fire! Sugai will think it’s a fake, but everyone else will believe it’s real,” Amou said, sketching lines over the floor plan.

“We’ll use the doors to control the fire and guide Sugai. The women will go to the central hall to let Isemi down while the men ‘search’ for fire extinguishers. At some point, Samura will make a show of going off on his own to get a fire extinguisher. Then he’ll sneak back and lock us inside the room!”

His pen flew across the page.

“Once we’re free, the wild Hirutani will be on fire! We’ll use a mannequin for that. The fake gun will be nearby. Sugai might have the real one in his room, so we’ll give him time to swap them. He’ll realize that this is the chance to pin all the murders on the psychotic Hirutani. We’ll record the whole thing and get the gun—”

The outline was complete. We just needed to fill in the details.

“It’s perfect…”

“Perfect.”

We gazed in awe at our completed work.

“I’m a little nervous about someone like Samura ad-libbing

lines. Are you sure it's okay to burn down the Goddess House?" I asked.

"Don't worry. It was going to be torn down anyway. Maintenance costs are exorbitant, and many historic buildings are being demolished for that reason. Honestly, it should've been burned down long ago. My grandfather's dream built it, so it's only right for him to have the final say. How about we give them one riveting performance, as an offering to the dead."

I nodded. Now we just had to see who else would join us in this dangerous gamble.

11

"All of you! You were all just acting to trick me?!" Sugai shouted, drenched and wild-eyed as he looked around at us. Droplets of rain flew from his mouth.

"Everyone agreed immediately. That's how important their friends are to them," I declared. "Surrender, Sugai. Repent for what you've done and start a new life!"

"Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! Dammit…!" Sugai cried through his tears. "I knew that love was nothing but a risk. I fell for that stupid woman… Dammit… Why did I…?"

"Sugai…"

"Did you know there's a flower called Karin? I gave her one once. Do you know what it represents? True love. What a joke. No, it's actually perfect. Because she only loved herself…"

Sugai's voice overflowed with grief.

During this time, the flames had fanned out violently, and Amou yelled, "The fire is spreading quickly! We're almost out of time!"

"You'd better be careful, too, Youichi," Sugai said darkly. "All women are born actors."

Then the lights suddenly went out. Someone screamed. Sugai's voice echoed from the darkness.

"Well, it doesn't matter. You're all dying soon."

The blade of a knife glinted in the firelight, and Sugai's murderous face appeared through the flames. An image flashed in the back of my mind—had I come so far only to die now?

Suddenly, a shadow moved in front of me.

The shadow fell to the ground.

The flames illuminated its face.

I froze. Hoarse words tumbled from my mouth.

“How…? Why…?”

It was Chitose.

The bronze handle of the knife was lodged deep in her stomach.

I looked up toward the sky, horrified. The scene from my visions was unfolding before my eyes.

A shadowy moon burned above us.

It wasn’t the real moon, but the night sky, visible through a round hole in the flaming ceiling.

I bent over, calling out to Chitose. She already lay in the grasp of death.

That’s when I noticed her right eye was a different color—a hazel brown, like a jewel. Her black color contact lens had been knocked out when Hirutani hit her with the butt of the gun. I had seen those eyes before.

Then she spoke in a voice all too familiar to me.

“Yochi, I’m sorry…”

The world distorted around me. I was completely dumbstruck, my mind paralyzed. I couldn’t comprehend what I was seeing. It didn’t make any sense.

But one undeniable truth lay before me.

“Miri?”

Tears rolled down her cheek.

I looked into her eyes, and—

A pair of eyes open in the darkness.

The *mummy man* is standing before me.

He’s wrapping bandages around his head.

And there, reflected in the mirror, I see Miri.

Hazel eyes peek out from between the bandages.

Tears streaming out of both eyes, Miri’s voice says: “I must save him.”

The memory quickly distorts. The sound of a distant storm

follows.

There's not enough time!

I look into those eyes as well.

Breaking through the tempest of emotions, I extend time further—

"You're not going to look like you anymore. Are you sure you're okay with that?"

"Yes, I've made up my mind."

A bright light shines in front of Miri. Her eyelids hanging half-open, a human figure moving through her cloudy vision. Every sensation feels distant. Miri might be losing consciousness. But her eyes had saved these images.

The human figure looks into my eyes, then begins moving something silver.

I finally understood. I'm undergoing surgery. The intense light shining down is the operating light.

While any sense of time is distorted by anesthesia, the surgery continues.

The surgical blade cuts through my skin…

The drill shaves away at my bones.

"And we're done. After a couple months of downtime, you'll be able to start a brand-new life."

"Thank you so much, doctor."

I return from those eyes within the eyes.

A trembling hand reaches up to the bandages on my face.

Then *Miri* begins to slowly unwrap them.

And the face that shines through is Chitose's.

I tentatively touch the tip of my nose, move my neck, and stroke my jawline.

Tears continue to gently roll down my cheeks from those eyes.

"I have to save him."

I vow.

"I have to, I have to, I have to!"

With a look full of determination, I focus on the eyes in my reflection.

Then the storm from the mirror arrives, engulfing everything in a moment—before disappearing.

Thrust out of those eyes, I stood dumbstruck.

Chitose was Miri.

And Miri was dead.

I gripped her lifeless hand and screamed.

Someone was pulling the knife from her stomach.

Gripping it underhanded, Sugai aimed its point at me and swung down.

A gunshot rang out.

Everything happened in slow motion. Sugai staggered for a moment before standing back up. Amou quickly pinned Sugai's arms behind his back. But Sugai wriggled free, turned, and lunged at Amou's jaw with the knife. Amou toppled to the floor.

Sugai went to swing the knife again, and—

The stage shook, and Sugai wobbled. It rotated so fast that I had to crouch down to avoid being thrown off. Samura, still in the control room after opening the ceiling, was operating the stage to help. The world became a blur of spinning lines.

"Kamisuki!"

Hirutani kept yelling something, but with the Doppler effect, I couldn't make out the words.

The stage suddenly stopped spinning. The momentum threw me to the floor, and Sugai fell, too. I tried to stand up, but the dizziness was overwhelming. Sugai, being closer to the center, was just as disoriented.

"Sugai—," Isemi yelled, holding the gun we had collected earlier. "How dare you kill Karin!"

No, Isemi was going to kill him!

Just then a loud clang rang out, and the stage started turning fast. Sugai fell over.

Then another loud clang sounded, and the stage continued to spin rapidly. Sugai stumbled. Isemi, having climbed onto the rotating stage, lost his balance, too. His bloodshot eyes gleamed with madness. I was horrified—he had come here to kill Sugai!

He couldn't aim well with the stage turning, so he decided to climb up. It was like trying to shoot someone from a moving car.

It's easier when you're on the same level.

Staggering, Isemi found his balance and slowly stood up, gripping the gun tightly with both hands. He raised the barrel.

Evil thoughts crossed my mind. Sugai would be better off dead. He had killed Miri. But I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms, bit down on my lip, and shouted, "Samura!"

The stage screeched to a halt with a clang. I fell forward, smacking my cheek against the floor, tasting blood. Lifting my head, I saw Sugai struggling to stand up in the spinning world.

The knife and the gun.

Both had fallen to the stage floor at an equal distance from Sugai. I tried to leap for them, but my legs wouldn't move. Sugai, moving like a zombie, lumbered toward the gun.

"Kill, ah, I'll kill you! I kill you all! @#*$!"

Spewing incoherently, Sugai stood and leveled the gun. Terror overcame me, but in the next instant, all my fear somehow melted away.

I found him pathetic.

In my eyes, Sugai appeared so pathetic it almost made me sad. The gun looked more like a crutch than a weapon. He was just barely standing, clinging to his crutch. That's how it looked to me.

"Sugai," I spoke calmly. "There's only one bullet left. How are you going to kill everyone?"

Sugai looked at the gun in confusion and then dived for the knife.

That's when Isemi, who had sneaked up behind him, tackled him to the ground. Sugai fell hard, creating an opening.

"Kamisuki!"

"Kamisuki!"

Hirutani and Umeko yelled at the same time, tossing a fire extinguisher my way.

I removed the pin and pressed the handle. Foam sprayed over Sugai. I dashed into the foam, catching sight of Sugai's wide eyes. He was aiming the gun at me. Instinctively, I jerked my head to the side.

Bang—!

The last bullet grazed my left ear. I swung the fire extinguisher at his jaw with all my strength. His eyes rolled back, and he collapsed.

I looked down at Sugai, now unconscious, and sighed.

The choice between the gun and the knife… He had chosen the gun, a reflection of his weakness. If he had never picked up the gun, maybe he would have never killed anyone.

Just then the scaffolding around the circular opening in the roof buckled and came crashing down with a tremendous noise. We ducked instinctively as the ground shook beneath us.

Thankfully, nothing landed on us.

“Get out of here! Get out!” I yelled.

We filed through the trapdoor in the stage. Some mats had been laid out below. Samura helped Amou down, and I carried Sugai through.

I glanced back—Miri’s body was pinned under the fallen scaffolding. I wanted to abandon Sugai and run to her, but I steeled myself and forced the thought away.

I had to leave her there. Tears streamed down my face as I followed the others.

We dashed through the concrete corridors and emerged by the dock at the back of the island. This passage was likely used to bring heavy equipment, like large instruments, into the building.

The rain had stopped.

We climbed the sloping island, and in the distance, the Goddess House burned. We stood silently, watching it.

Eventually, the eastern sky turned red. The dawn was incredibly beautiful.

And with that, everything ended.

Epilogue

1

The setting for the final act of a series of murders being the very same Goddess House built by a legendary actor grabbed the world's attention, sparking a lot of speculation and wild theories. But no one in the Drama Club ever spoke about it publicly, so the topic quickly faded, and the news shifted back to stories involving COVID. The incident became buried in the endless sea of information, much like dirt covering forgotten remains.

Sugai was arrested and convicted, but I didn't bother to learn the details. No one ever realized that Chitose Sakuraba's body wasn't her own. She didn't have any family to notice.

The incident ended, and normal life resumed. Or at least, it should have. But I couldn't move on. I couldn't leave my room. My air conditioner had broken, no longer carving its cool tunnels through the stagnant air. Saburou had run off somewhere. Fall eventually arrived, and I stayed alone in my silent, stagnant room. I didn't even rehearse with the Drama Club anymore.

One night, a terrible dream startled me awake, and I remembered something Kashimo had once said.

"Sitting alone in the dark for so long lets me examine my soul. I tried to discover its true nature and started ridding myself of all unnecessary things, like peeling layers off an onion."

After that, I lived on nothing but water for three days. Then I examined my soul.

And I found a stage.

A blue light, the color of sadness, and a golden light, tinged with nostalgia, illuminated the stage. I wasn't there. It was just Miri. Just Miri on the stage, the only actress for all of time. I was no different from Kashimo.

Amou visited me during that time.

“How have you been?” he asked kindly.

We talked about the world over tea. My heart stung when the conversation shifted to theater. While discussing Hirutani’s curse, the names of Ason Amou and his wife came up.

“Now that I think about it,” Amou mused, “the two of them shared a kind of curse. My grandmother was cursed to be killed by my grandfather, and he was cursed to be killed by her. *The Maiden of Kissho* was the only thing that could have broken it. But those tiny polyps in my grandmother’s throat robbed them of that opportunity forever… It all felt like karma. And so that curse transferred to me.”

He set a DVD of *The Specter of the Furrow* on the table. As he left, he added, “I’m waiting for you. You’re the only one I’m waiting for. Only you can break my curse.”

I couldn’t bring myself to watch it. The DVD sat in the corner of my room, constantly tormenting my soul.

Near the end of October, a package arrived. It completely surprised me, and I opened it apprehensively.

My breath caught.

It was a copy of René Magritte’s *The Lovers*.

I finally remembered. Right before I went to Isemi’s house, I had stopped by the antique store and bought it, arranging for it to arrive before Chitose’s birthday. I had assumed that doing that would fool Miri.

In the painting, the lovers’ heads were covered in white fabric, and they kissed through the cloth, blind to the world. I recalled the moment I kissed Chitose—Miri—through our masks, and my chest ached with grief.

After that, I finally sat down and watched *The Specter of the Furrow*.

Chitose’s performance moved me to the core. Miri had likely tried to hold back, to not be too good an actor in order to hide her secret. But even in that, she excelled.

“Oh, but is this what becomes of our fate? Too fragile to stand upon, too strong to break…”

The final scene, where d’Éon dies, was performed by a pair who had already left this world. They created a realm of pure bliss. A beauty beyond this world filled the screen.

“And so, in the end, who was this person that I loved?”

“Who indeed? I wonder. Who indeed…”

Chitose, in her role as Chevalier d’Éon, cried openly. Her sadness felt so real that my chest tightened.

Who was Miri?

Why had she risked her life to save mine?

Who was the real one? Miri or Chitose?

Playing Elizabeth, Amagasaki replied, “And yet, my love was true.”

I sobbed.

Whoever Miri truly was, I loved her.

2

One day, Kashimo showed up at my apartment. For a moment, I thought she was Miri.

“Long time no see. And so we meet for the third time.”

“The third time?” I tilted my head in confusion, and then it hit me. “That day at the dock. It was you in the yellow rain jacket, pretending to be Miri!”

She nodded.

“Yuzunoha told me to. I knew she could see the future. I knew about you and what would happen between the two of you…”

A distant look spread across her face, a mix of sorrow and resignation. Then she held out a light blue envelope.

“A letter from Yuzunoha.”

“A letter from Miri?”

“Well, that’s all from me. See you later.”

“Later?” I repeated, confused, but she let those puzzling words linger in the air as she left.

I went back into my room and stared at the letter. On the back, it was labeled A LETTER FROM THE DECEASED. My heart clenched painfully, and I felt dizzy. Steadying myself, I opened the letter with trembling fingers.

Yochi,

I’m so sorry. Let me start by asking you to forgive me—for continuing to lie to you, for choosing to die for you. I’m so sorry for all of it. Do you remember the day we walked along the banks of the

Arakawa River toward the Goshikizakura Bridge? I think I can finally fulfill the promise I made to you that day. Why do I love you? I'll tell you everything, holding nothing back.

I was an orphan, raised in a foster care facility in Hyogo Prefecture.

At first, my ability to see the future wasn't strong. I would get a feeling my foster mother would return, and she would, or that a flower pot would break the next day, and it did. But as I grew older, my power grew tremendously. My vision became nearly godlike. To deceive you, I had to make you underestimate my ability, but my power is far stronger than I ever let on.

There was a girl at the orphanage who was my best friend. In that horrible place, she was the only one who understood me. Together, we were whole.

One day, when I was eight, I saw a future where she died. That's when I understood the nature of fate—a lethal fate cannot easily be changed. To alter it, another life must take its place. The odds of her dying were about 50 percent. In the other 50 percent, a boy nearby bravely sacrificed himself to save her.

Or I could save her by dying in her place.

I was just a scared little girl. I couldn't handle such a decision. I hid under blankets in the orphanage closet, shivering, waiting to see what fate would decide.

In the end, she died alone, suffering in the freezing rain.

My personal hell began that day. I was, in a sense, a child holding a powerful ticket. I could save someone's life by offering my own—but only one life. All others, I had to watch die. I despised this unwanted, unbearable burden. The pain was unimaginable, as if my soul was being torn apart. I'll confess something: I thought about becoming a murderer. If I could kill without remorse, I believed I could free myself from the guilt.

Then one day, a letter arrived at the orphanage. From my window, I saw a boy put it in the mailbox. I retrieved it and couldn't believe what I read.

"A letter from the deceased."

It was a letter from you. You had witnessed my friend's death and wrote to me out of kindness and responsibility. The handwriting was messy but honest, like you were trying to ease my grief, even just a little. You even included the cherry blossom hairpin she had planned to buy for me that day. I looked into your future and saw you cleaning up the remains of your broken cow-shaped piggy bank. You had spent your little savings on me without hesitation. I was so happy—it truly saved me. From that day forward, I wore that hairpin every day, even though it wasn't meant for someone as young as I was.

I knew then that I had to find a way to meet the boy who saved me.

I searched for a future where we would meet, a future where we would fall in love. I fell in love with the version of you the future me loved. I watched dreamily from the past as we shared wonderful moments together. It was like being absorbed in an enchanting story about a Disney princess.

But it didn't last. I saw your death.

The first time, it was a simple traffic accident. You died saving a girl from being hit by a car. What shocked me most was that it was 100 percent fated to happen. As a child, you deeply regretted not saving my friend, so you spent all your willpower ensuring you saved that girl. Seeing that, I altered the future so the accident never happened, and the girl lived happily. But changing that only shifted the cause of your death.

I dreamed of us having a happy family—two girls, a boy—but I cried endlessly, knowing it could never happen. So I decided to use my "ticket" to save you. I thought it would be easy, like a vaccination. I would endure a little bit of pain and it would be over with soon.

But saving you wasn't easy. You tried to save me by looking into the future through my eyes, every single time. You became a singularity, causing time lines to multiply exponentially. It was a kind of universal reincarnation, a fate no one could change.

I kept searching for some path that would guarantee your safety. In doing so, the future time lines kept branching. My actions grew more calculated, and your death became more complex—grotesque, like a spider with a hundred legs. The series of murders were always fated, but you weren't originally involved. You became entangled because of my attempts to change fate.

But I finally found a way to break through.

To make sure that I could save you, I could not meet you.

That path brought too many sacrifices, and fear caused me to hesitate.

Still, I saw one ray of light in the future after saving you, and I followed it.

I've spent so much more of my life looking into the future than living in the present. The futures I have yet to experience are like dreams. In the blink of an eye, they disappear like bubbles. I lived more in dreams than I did in the present. I met you in my dreams, and I loved you in those dreams.

But where is the boundary between dreams and reality? And who would laugh at such dreams?

I learned to act, to deceive you. I faked my death in a plane crash. I underwent surgery, got braces, and changed everything about myself to become someone new—Chitose Sakuraba. I wore high heels to

disguise my height, just to steal a single kiss from you. Without them, I probably would have been too short to pull it off.

You know the rest.

I wrote all this in the past tense to avoid confusion, but in truth, I haven't even met you yet. I'm going to finish this letter, cut up an avocado, mess it up and cut myself, cry a little, and then meet you. I'm both nervous and excited.

It's spring here, and the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. They're beautiful.

I began this letter with an apology, and I'd like to end it with thanks.

Thank you for giving me your heart, for loving me.

Thank you. I love you.

—Miri

The envelope contained a cherry blossom hairpin.

I recalled everything that had happened, sank to the floor, and wept.

3

Winter arrived, and snow began to softly fall.

I still lived in the depths of despair, like Tetsumonkai Shonin as he dug his long, endless tunnel. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop wishing it had been me who died instead of Miri.

I didn't bother repairing the air conditioner, and my room froze me stiff. I stayed wrapped in my blanket, forgoing food, staring blankly into space, enduring the pain in my heart.

How had I lost to Miri? The biggest cause for my defeat must have been my ignorance of "Time." Time moves differently for elves than it does for humans. Miri had so much time. I hadn't realized how one person, spending so much time cultivating their faith, could achieve something so monumental.

Practically a mummy, I rummaged through my refrigerator in search of calories. One of the three strawberry milks that Isemi had bought for me still remained. Looking at the cherry blossom–colored package, I remembered something Chitose had once said.

Go on three dates with me, and I'll help you.

Don't forget, you owe me one more date!

But we had only gone on two dates. Had she set the bar one

date higher to trick me? Or was she counting the time we walked together? Something didn't feel right. It was as if I was forgetting something important.

That's when I heard a rustling sound. I jumped and ran to the sliding door. Saburou was pawing at the glass. I frantically opened the door and stroked him, trying to warm him up.

"Where were you? You're so thin…!"

I poured half of my strawberry milk into a bowl for Saburou and drank the rest. He curled up in a ball on my lap, nestling into the blanket for warmth. As I watched him doze comfortably, tears welled in my eyes.

"Don't ever run off again. You're my family."

He was as dirty as the day I first found him, and I realized I would have to bathe him.

Just then a jolt ran through me.

The first time I met him—

I remembered the first time Miri and I talked.

Yochi, for you, this is the first time we've met, right? I'm Miri Yuzunoha. Yuzunoha *is written as "leaf of the yuzu tree," and* Miri *is "beautiful village."*

Yochi…?

A future Youichi said I could call you that. The first time I met you, it was under cherry trees in full bloom.

I hadn't yet told Miri to call me Yochi.

I remembered something that Kashimo had said.

You might think you know her, but in reality, you just passed her by. You haven't really met her.

So we still haven't met.

But we were going to meet soon.

"Saburou, let's go meet Miri."

4

We boarded the Tokaido-Sanyo bullet train at Tokyo Station and transferred to the local Tokaido-Sanyo Line at Shin-Osaka Station.

Exiting the Rokko Tunnel, I exhaled and muttered, "The train came out of the long tunnel into the country of snow."

Snow covered the landscape of Hyogo.

We changed trains again at Kakogawa Station, taking the Kakogawa Line to Ao Station. I let Saburou out of his carrier, and he looked curiously at the unfamiliar snow. He pressed his paw into it, shaking his tail in delight. I cradled him as we walked through the snow, crossing train tracks, cutting through a neighborhood, and walking along the Kakogawa River. Snowflakes flickered down onto the river's pristine surface before vanishing.

Suddenly, Saburou leaped out of my arms.

"Saburou, wait!"

He darted down the riverbank and crossed the Awata Bridge. I ran after him, my heart pounding. *Wait. Don't run away. Don't leave me.* The air was cold, making it hard to breathe. My chest tightened, and tears welled up in my eyes.

On the opposite bank of the river, Saburou stopped. He looked back at me, tail flicking, as if waiting.

Then it hit me—this was the Ono Sakura Zutsumi Corridor.

Cherry trees lined both sides of the path, though now they were draped in snow. Nearly 650 cherry trees stretched along this two-and-a-half-mile corridor. Miri and I were both from Hyogo, and this was the most famous cherry blossom spot in the prefecture.

I took a deep breath, then exhaled.

I picked Saburou up and looked into his eyes—

Miri was there.

Standing under the blooming cherry trees inside those eyes. A canary yellow skirt, her white shirt, a tunnel of cherry blossoms stretching to infinity, the spring sun, and the cherry blossom hairpin that looked so grown-up on her young self. She wore them all elegantly, standing there like a vision.

"It's nice to meet you," she said.

Tears stung my eyes. "It's nice to meet you, too."

She looked shy, happy, and sad.

"That hairpin looks really good on you," I commented.

"Thank you." She blushed and touched the hairpin. "I kept extremely good care of it."

“My meager savings were put to good use.”

I laughed, almost crying. Miri cried softly as she laughed.

“Your hand. Did you cut it slicing the avocado?”

“Yeah. It hurt,” she said as she stroked the Band-Aid on her left pointer finger. Miri, who cries over a little cut like this, would undergo surgery, change her whole appearance, and even get stabbed in the stomach in the end. Thinking about it all hurt too much.

“Miri…”

You don’t have to save me.

We don’t have to meet.

You should be happy somewhere beautiful and warm.

I wanted to say all those things.

But she didn’t let me.

“There’s something I want to show you. I want you to look into my eyes. Then I want you to look at the light that I’m trying to reach.”

I hesitated.

I had a feeling that seeing this “light” would change everything.

“Okay.”

I finally nodded and looked into Miri’s eyes.

And in that one moment, I experienced everything.

It was the final section of part three of *The Vicissitudes of the Three Realms*. I was playing the lead role, and Kashimo was the heroine. We stood on the circular stage of the Goddess House, which Amou had rebuilt—

The fateful theater.

The greatest invention in music is silence.

The greatest invention in literature is the blank page.

The greatest invention in film is darkness.

The greatest invention in theater is the pause.

Just like Amou had said, everything existed within nothingness, and nothingness contained everything.

The future me felt Miri’s eyes in the darkness of the audience. I felt the presence of my past eyes, too. Amou, Kandagawa, Ason Amou, Yukie Amou, Kuroyama, Amagasaki. I felt the eyes of all those who lived and all those who had died.

Tetsumonkai Shonin and Suzume, Hibari—the karma from a

tale woven across countless generations had been saved by a goddess coming down to Earth. The goddess floated into the air, and the ceiling opened. The limitless light of the sun was pouring in through the center of the ceiling.

The Light of Salvation.

Darkness disappeared from every corner as the light shone down on empty seats.

It shone directly into the past, illuminating the path, into Miri's eyes, allowing her soul to steel itself for everything that lay ahead.

I understood everything.

It was impossible to change Miri's mind. That was part of our fate. And I would continue to walk unfaltering down the path the light had illuminated. I would endure every sacrifice, repeatedly working myself to the bone, and when I reached the stage at the end of the catwalk, Miri would see that light.

Once I had done that, the curse would be lifted—

A gust of wind blew.

It transcended space and time, creating a flurry of cherry petals and snow.

I shivered.

Miri fixed her hair, smiled at me, and asked:

"Youichi, can I call you Yochi?"

I closed my eyes, opened them, returned her smile, and replied.

"Of course— Anything for you."



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