
Pitch-Black Infatuation
Rokakoen

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YEN ON
NEW YORK



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PITCH-BLACK INFATUATION

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Translation by Cal Hampton

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Main Characters

Toshihiko Katayama:

A young man of astounding beauty. Draws gazes wherever he goes. Currently works as a teacher at Matsuno Juku, a cram school.

Yuuki Sayama:

One of Toshihiko's coworkers. Modern literature teacher. An agreeable young man liked by all.

Midori Harukawa:

Senior member of the teaching staff at Matsuno Juku. Teaches English. Attractive and somewhat headstrong.

Kirara Kawahara:

Toshihiko's ex. Also works at Matsuno Juku.

Nanaka Yokozawa:

A young girl who attends the Pádraig Aoba Church. She asks Kouki Aoyama for advice about a scary story that's been going around at her school.

Rumi Sasaki:

Thirty-four. Head of the Sasaki Agency, which deals with paranormal phenomena. Androgynous.

Kouki Aoyama:

Twenty-seven. Rumi's assistant. Good-natured and sensible. Always dragged around at Rumi's pace.

Mononobe:

Young shaman living in Shikoku.



Chapter 1: Being Watched

1

The cram school is a five-story building. It is somewhat old and not very tall, but it covers a wide area. Several cars and bikes are parked in front of it. Mothers are milling around, looking at their watches. After a while, the children come running out. Some are smiling, and others hang their heads dejectedly. The mothers find their kids and begin chatting with them. Whether they smile affectionately or deliver a harsh scolding, it's clear they all have their children's best interests at heart. I can tell from the kind looks in their eyes.

Mommy… You and I were never like that, were we? You told me girls didn't *need* to do any extra studying. But to tell you the truth, this is something I've always wanted to do.

While I'm thinking about you, the children disappear. I pull myself together. He'll be here soon. I don't look strange, do I? I go to the salon once a month, and I buy products there to use between visits. I'm wearing my new pleated maxi dress; the lady in the store said it looked good on me since I'm so tall. I've even got perfume on. It's

the kind you used to wear on dates with Daddy—not that I ever saw the two of you go out anywhere—the one that smells like mugwort. I think it's a lovely scent, but what will he think? Will he like it?

You also told me that girls need to be pretty. I said you were being old-fashioned, but the truth is, I agree with you. An ugly woman will never find love. A lot of people these days say you shouldn't discriminate based on looks or gender, so I'd probably get in trouble if I voiced that out loud. But that's all just empty talk; it's never going to change the way things really are.

Has anyone ever met a man who *dislikes* beautiful women? And even if they claim to take personality into account, let's say it came down to a choice between two women with equally good personalities, one pretty, one ugly. The pretty one would win out every time.

I take a deep breath and straighten up. You used to tell me my forehead got wrinkled when I thought too hard. You said it was unseemly, that it made me look like a monkey. Since I'm seeing him today, I'll try not to think about my other problems.

There he is. I recognize him even from this distance. I'd know that beautiful face anywhere. What was that thing Haruki Murakami said? That he was "attracted not by some quantifiable, external beauty, but by something deep down, something absolute"? When I first read that, I thought it sounded pretentious, but I get it now.

He's perfect. Not like a doll or something artificial, though. His beauty is more natural—no, supernatural. I know it sounds cliché, but he looks like something out of a dream.

Several of the mothers turn in his direction. It's obvious they've been waiting around in hopes of seeing him. There are less of them than there used to be. The school put out a notice on their website asking people not to congregate outside. Anyone with half a brain would take that as a cue to back off. I glare coldly at the women who are still here—the ones with less than half a brain.

Wait around all you want—he's not going to be interested in any of *you*. Besides, you're married with children; what are you even

thinking? If you've found a man already, don't go shopping around for more. As if any of you would catch his eye anyway. You're so fawning, so disgusting. It's women like you he hates most.

As I continue to glare at the vulgar women, one of them turns my way. Our eyes meet, and she fails to completely stifle a scream. She hurries away, clutching her son close to her. Not just vulgar, but rude, too. You ought to expect people to glare at you, the way you've been carrying on. Where do you get off playing the victim and staring at me like I'm some kind of monster?

Now I'm in a bad mood. I see my reflection in a nearby window, and my breath catches. My forehead is wrinkled. Like a monkey's. I can't meet him looking like this. I'm his one and only soulmate. I know I'll never be as perfect as him, but I still have to be pretty enough that he won't be embarrassed to be seen with me.

I'm not like the riffraff who flock around him shamelessly. I don't approach him while chattering in a loud, uncouth voice. I just silently tiptoe forward and step into his shadow.

2

When people described someone as "a beauty," they were almost always talking about a woman. But that phrase was the only accurate way of describing Toshihiko Katayama. He wasn't just beautiful; he was beauty itself. Words like *handsome* or *attractive* failed to do full justice to the sublime arrangement of features that made up his face.

Toshihiko wasn't ignorant of his gift. For as long as he could remember, he had gotten more compliments from people than everyday greetings. *Cute* might just as well have been his own special nickname, something that applied exclusively to him.

Even so, he never tried to build a career based on his appearance. It was plain for all to see that he was more beautiful than any celebrity. But he could never imagine being part of that world. The reason for that was also plain to see. Whenever he was in any kind of group, Toshihiko felt like an outsider. His looks may have garnered him envy and admiration, but they never did him any good. People

tended to see him as an oddball, and in all honesty, that wasn't a bad assessment.

Toshihiko found it hard to hold down a steady job. Not because he lacked social or communication skills. On the contrary, he had been hired by a major brokerage firm immediately after graduating from college, and there, people had widely regarded him as one of the most capable new hires. But he didn't even last a year before resigning. None of his coworkers had been surprised. However proficient he might have been at his job, there was something absurd about him having to work; it was as though he were a fish that had been dragged out of the water and forced to live on land.

By that point in his life, he'd already had a decent idea of the kind of person he was, so he wasn't too disappointed by his failure. He'd only taken the job to reaffirm just how pointless it was for him to try living a "normal" life anyway.

At present, Toshihiko worked as a teacher at Matsuno Juku, a small cram school focused on helping students prepare for high school entrance exams. He wasn't a full-time employee. This wasn't a job he needed to support himself. Thanks to some shrewd investments he'd made in the past, he had enough money to live comfortably on his own for the rest of his life. The only reason he was there was to hold on to some small sense of normality.

In Toshihiko's mind, working for a corporation or a hospital or any place that was part of a large organization meant working like a "normal" person. Being "normal" was something he was unable to do, and that really bothered him. No matter how financially stable a person might be, if they weren't normal, they were *ab*normal. He put on a show of being happy and content with his life, but deep down, he found it hard to live with the inherent strangeness dwelling within him.

Working as a teacher had done little to ease his worries. He'd made a real effort not to drift to the periphery like he usually did. He kept his passionate interest in the occult—not to mention his second, even less socially acceptable hobby—a secret from his coworkers. As

a result, though he was still considered a little eccentric, he never crossed over into "abnormal" territory.

"Mr. Katayama, what are you doing for the rest of the day?"

Toshihiko's coworker Yuuki Sayama called out to him. Sayama taught modern literature and had started working at the cram school directly after graduation. He had a pleasant smile and an easygoing manner that seemed to endear him to everyone he met.

Standing next to him was Midori Harukawa, another member of the teaching staff. She was a tall, slender lady who taught English. Her face had the demure beauty of a Japanese doll, and at first glance, she came off as a little hard to approach. Once you got to know her, though, she was a very considerate person, and she had helped Toshihiko out of a jam on several occasions.

Although he was grateful he'd become sufficiently integrated into the group for the other teachers to invite him out after work, he had other things he needed to deal with.

"Sorry, I'm not feeling very well today…"

"Are you going to be all right?" Sayama furrowed his well-defined eyebrows. "We noticed you seemed a little off. That's why we called out to you."

He turned to Midori for confirmation. She nodded.

"Your skin has always been very bright and lustrous, but Sayama noticed it's started to look a little *too* pale lately, unhealthily so."

"I'm fine."

Fearing he might have cut them off too quickly, Toshihiko hastened to come up with an excuse.

"The AC in my room is broken, so I haven't been sleeping well these last few nights. You know how humid it's been these days."

"Can't you get it fixed?" Midori asked.

"I could, but that kind of work costs a lot…"

Even he knew that was a poor excuse. Considering the upscale neighborhood Toshihiko lived in, no one would believe he didn't have the money for some home-appliance repairs. Still, it was better than

letting these two find out the real reason he hadn't been at his best lately.

"Oh, really? Well, at least you know what's causing it. Just be careful—lack of sleep can be a more serious problem than you might think."

Sayama seemed to pick up on the fact that he didn't want them prying any further; that was good. Putting Midori off the scent wasn't so easy, though. Refusing to take the hint, she stepped closer to him.

"Are you hiding something from us?"

"Of course not."

"Really, now?"

Midori stared at Toshihiko's face intently. She was a dependable work friend, but she could get a little overbearing sometimes. And she was only like that with Toshihiko. He suspected his physical beauty was to blame. It was clear Midori had been harboring some kind of affection for him for a while. Toshihiko had used that to his advantage before, so he didn't have much right to complain about it now.

"Honest, I'm fine. If something does go wrong, you'll be the first one to know about it."

He finished with a crooked, rakish smile. The severity in Midori's gaze seemed to melt away in a flash.

After he was allowed to go on his way, Toshihiko heaved a sigh. He was so tired of all this. Tired of having to rely on his appearance to get what he wanted. Tired of women who were rendered putty in his hands from a simple smile. Actually, that wasn't fair. Gender had nothing to do with it. It wasn't just women; this happened with everyone.

His looks allowed him to worm his way around anyone in a one-on-one conversation. If only *that woman* would actually talk to him in person, he could probably set everything right just like he had with Midori. Then again, his appearance was likely what had caused this problem in the first place.

Toshihiko had a stalker. He'd noticed about a month ago. His rare beauty had always drawn gazes of admiration from the young and old, men and women. But this was different from the usual passing glances he got on the street. It was a persistent gaze, one that felt like it was practically clinging to him. When he'd looked around, there was nobody there. It had been a little unsettling, but it was hardly the first time he'd been the target of such attention. He'd gone home, taken a shower, and thought no more about it.

From that day on, however, Toshihiko began feeling the strange gaze on him more often, as if someone was out there waiting for him to notice them. It was one thing for it to happen with other people around, but feeling those eyes on him when he was alone after work really started to get to him. He'd hurry along the street, worried that someone might step out and stab him. Even at home, he'd feel terrible the whole rest of the evening. That was just how much the mysterious gaze was taking its toll on him.

Naturally, it wasn't just the fact that he was being watched that was so frightening. Things were escalating—Toshihiko had started getting letters. There was never any postmark on them, so his stalker must have dropped them directly in his mailbox.

You wore your gray pinstripe suit today. It looks so lovely against your porcelain skin.

The note was printed, not handwritten. It could have come from anyone, but instinctively, Toshihiko knew it was the work of the person who was stalking him. He wasn't sure how to put it into words, but the persistent, clingy aura that seemed to emanate from the page was a perfect match for the gaze. A second one came the next day.

Why didn't you send a reply? When a lady says something nice about you, it's only polite to pay her a compliment in return. You must know that. Why haven't you said anything nice about me? Do you think I'm so hopeless that there's nothing about me worth praising? I'm starting to worry…

Toshihiko was surprised at the sudden shift to a more familiar tone, but he ignored that letter as well. While the whole thing was still creepy and more than a little unnerving, he didn't feel any animosity in the words themselves. It probably wasn't worth making a fuss over.

Looking back on it now, though, he wished he hadn't been so naive.

Enough is enough. What are you so mad about? Is it because I'm wearing your ring? You're the one who said you wanted something as tangible proof of our marriage.

The envelope for that letter had also contained a picture frame decorated with Sanrio characters. Inside it was a photo of Toshihiko. He wasn't facing the camera, and he had no idea when it might have been taken. It had grimy brown smears all around it. The cartoony characters had a speech bubble coming out of them saying TOGETHER FOREVER! He started to feel queasy.

This wasn't the first time a strange woman (or man) had developed a delusional attachment to him. His obsessives usually fell into two categories—people who were clearly weird right from the get-go, and people who slowly got weirder over time. This woman fell into the first category since she had escalated things so quickly.

And from that point on, the crazy factor in the letters from his deranged admirer only became more intense.

I made your favorite gratin dish for you today. The secret ingredient is a little miso in the béchamel sauce! Did you figure that out? Did you notice the difference?

I watched you answer a student's question today. You seemed pretty happy about it. Why, though? You don't usually look like that…

Mirei Nakamura is a cutie, isn't she? But she's just a child. Cheating is one thing, but if you start messing around with minors, I'm definitely asking for a divorce.

Would you even care if we did get divorced?

If you divorce me, I'll kill that brat and your hag of a mother, too!

I'm sorry, I went too far. Please don't hate me. Consider it a sign of just how deeply I love you. It's not anything worth hating me for, is it?

Toshihiko never replied to any of the letters. In spite of that, they kept coming, continuing this strange one-sided conversation. While

they varied in intensity, the sole point that stayed consistent was that the writer believed Toshihiko to be her husband.

You're a gorgeous man, but you need to be more responsible. Oh, I'm just kidding. Not completely, though. We're married now, but you're never at home. That's not normal— anybody can see that. Please come home soon. If you stay away much longer, ***I don't know what I'll do****.*

In that final letter, *I don't know what I'll do* had been thicker than the rest of the text. And not because the writer had used the bold function in Word, either. There were marks on the paper that suggested the author had printed out the note normally, then traced over the last line with a pen. Once again, it was unnerving, but he expected the next letter would apologize for "going too far" again. Once again, he was being far too naive.

It was raining. No, *rain* was too tame a word. Something along the lines of "a torrential downpour" might be more appropriate. There had been weather warnings saying it would get more intense from the evening onward, so the students were being sent home early. Toshihiko went around checking the classrooms for stragglers, then got ready to head home himself. Just as he stepped into the entrance hall and grabbed his umbrella, however…

"Mr. Toshi, how's it going?"

…there was Mirei Nakamura, leaning against the umbrella rack. Mirei was a second-year middle schooler who dressed in flashy *gyaru* fashion. Her grades weren't good, and her attitude toward her studies wasn't much better. She freely acknowledged that the only reason she had enrolled at Matsuno Juku was because a friend told her there was "a really hot guy" working there. The hot guy in question was none other than Toshihiko himself.

Her parents were happy she was going to a cram school at all, regardless of her motivation for doing so. The management showed much the same attitude—serious or not, a student was a student, and more students meant more tuition fees. Dealing with anyone who was attracted to him always meant trouble for Toshihiko, and the fact that Mirei was a teenager only made it worse. He'd been warned not to treat her too harshly, though, so he was doing his best to let her down gently.

"Nakamura, why are you still here? And I've told you before to knock it off with that nickname. Call me Mr. Katayama."

"Well, you haven't left, either, have you, Mr. Toshi?"

Toshihiko let out a sigh and looked at the girl. She was certainly cute enough in her own way. Few girls of her age were so meticulous about their appearances. She probably had no shortage of admirers among her peers. But that wouldn't last forever.

Soon, the other girls would be wearing makeup, too, and she'd become one more pretty face in a pretty crowd. Not to mention how people tended to prioritize things besides appearance as they got older. Toshihiko was currently thirty-one, and to him, judging people on looks alone just felt stupid and shallow.

For now, though, Mirei was a child with absolute confidence in her own beauty. So far as Toshihiko was concerned, that was all she was—a child. Middle school or kindergarten, it made no difference. It was strange, but kids like this seemed to show up every year. They probably didn't understand that any adult who took their advances seriously was exactly the kind of person they should be steering clear of.

Mirei looked back at him, her eyes—made light brown with colored contacts—filled with expectation. Toshihiko sighed again.

"All right, I'll walk you to your bus stop, but then you're going home. The rain's only going to get worse from here on."

"Aw, can't you drive me?"

"Absolutely not. Besides, I take the train."

She groaned in a frustrated albeit childish manner and reluctantly got to her feet.

"I guess that's okay. At least I get to spend *some* time with you."

Reprimanding her any further would be too much trouble. Toshihiko shook off the arm she'd wrapped around his, and they left the school together. The rain was already pretty heavy. On a normal day, it would still be light at this hour, but today was as dark as if the sun had long since set.

Mirei's bus stop was in the opposite direction of the train station Toshihiko used, and they had to cross a footbridge to get there. Mirei went skipping up the steps light as a feather, smiling playfully back at Toshihiko. If she wanted him to hurry, she had another thing coming. He didn't have the stamina to climb that many stairs so quickly.

When he finally reached the top, gasping for air, he found Mirei there waiting for him. There was a highway overpass above them, giving them some measure of shelter from the rain. She smiled in a way she probably thought was seductive but really looked painfully awkward and unnatural.

"H-hey, Toshi. Can I talk to you about something important?"

"I guess…"

He honestly would have preferred she didn't, but he couldn't very well refuse. He closed his umbrella and went up beside her.

"It's like this… I like you, Toshi. Like, for real. Will you go out with me?"

"If that's all you've got to say, this conversation is over. I'm going home. Your stop's right at the bottom of those stairs anyway."

"Hold on!" Mirei grabbed his arm as he turned to leave. "I'm really serious here."

Toshihiko shook his arm free.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I could never have a relationship with you. You're a student, and on top of that, you're just a kid. That's all you are to me. Maybe you *are* serious, but that's not going to change how I feel."

"Come on, I've got some charms, don't I?"

Mirei hitched up her short skirt, revealing more of her bare legs. They were thin and scrawny. Still very much the legs of a child.

"Knock that off. No decent guy is going to be swayed by 'charms' like that."

"I've had sex before, you know. It was with my home tutor. I wouldn't mind doing it with you, too."

Toshihiko just stared at her. He'd always had the sense that there was something slightly off about this girl's behavior, and now he finally knew why. Her confidence was founded on past successes. Well, no doubt she thought of it as a success, but anyone else would see it as a profound failure.

He wasn't about to give her a lecture on the value of chastity. He wouldn't even have minded if her partner had been the same age as her. Kids weren't at their most rational during puberty, after all. The idea that having sex would make someone more mature or experienced was understandable from their point of view, at least. But an older man going along with it and actually getting involved with a girl like her was something that filled him with revulsion.

"Exactly how old was this guy?"

"I dunno… I think he said he'd graduated from college a little while back. Why are you asking? If you go out with me, I'll stop seeing him."

"I'm not going out with you, Nakamura. Any grown man who would is nothing but trash."

"Why are you being so harsh…?"

She was tearing up now.

"Maybe you'll understand once you get to be my age. You'll see just how disgusting it is for an adult to get into a relationship with a middle schooler."

"Toshi, you're so mean!"

"Nothing I've said has been unreasonable."

He looked down at her, his beautiful face the picture of composure.

"I think I should have a talk about that tutor with your parents. It's probably better if they hear it from someone other than you."

"Don't be ridiculous! This has nothing to do with my parents!"

Mirei threw her schoolbag down in frustration. The pretty leather bag with its cute unicorn design splattered in the rain, getting stained with dirty puddle water.

"Why does everyone treat me like a kid? Why?! Is it such a bad thing for me to fall in love?"

"It is from my point of view. But how someone reacts to you liking them is going to differ from person to person."

Toshihiko picked up the bag and tried to hand it to her, but she started backing away from him.

"You're awful! You're a terrible person! You're making fun of me now!"

"No, that's not it."

The next thing he knew, they'd reached the other side of the bridge. Mirei's bus stop was only a few feet away. If only he could get her to back off and go home…

"I'm just trying to tell you how most people—"

Toshihiko had barely opened his mouth when *somebody* slipped past him, moving with alarming speed. Something rough and scratchy brushed his arm. He spotted a tall figure with long black hair. His body moved before he could think. By the thinnest of margins, he managed to get in front of the figure and shove Mirei aside.

The next moment, there was an earsplitting scream, and the girl was suddenly a lot farther away. The rain had gotten even fiercer, stealing the warmth from Toshihiko's body—save for his arm, which burned like it was on fire. Even now, he could feel that unnerving, clingy gaze on him. As he desperately looked around in search of his assailant, his consciousness abruptly cut out.

When he woke up, his hand still felt warm. That was because his mother was holding it tight. He tried to sit up and groaned, his voice a weak, low croak. Everything from his shoulder down was fixed in place, and he was hot and feverish all over.

According to Toshihiko's mother, he'd fallen down the stairs on the pedestrian footbridge and passed out. Fortunately, his hip had taken most of the impact, so he'd avoided being paralyzed. However, he'd stuck his dominant hand out while falling and had ended up with an open fracture. The sorry state his left arm was in now was pitiful to behold.

"Weird… It doesn't hurt at all," he muttered, though he knew full well that was probably because of whatever painkillers they had him on.

"You're definitely going to develop a fever, though. I want you to get a brain scan, too, just in case."

"Sorry for the trouble."

The doctor in charge had shown up by his bedside and was eyeing Toshihiko intently.

"You're quite the handsome young man. You probably hear that a lot."

"Only every day the past thirty years."

The doctor laughed heartily. He left, saying Toshihiko seemed fine overall, but that he should take it easy and give the injury time to heal. Had the doctor thought Toshihiko was joking? As far as Toshikiho was concerned, his beauty was no laughing matter. He'd had to live with the consequences of it for more than thirty years and would likely continue to do so for many more.

His body felt heavy, so he did as he was told and lay down for some bed rest. His mother was worried about him, naturally, but it wasn't the first (or the second) time something like this had happened. Now that she knew he'd regained consciousness, she felt comfortable leaving him there and heading home.

Toshihiko lay in his hospital bed, bored, not even being able to read or mess around on his phone. He closed his eyes and tried to

think over what had happened to him.

He didn't care about that silly girl, for starters. From what he'd heard, Mirei hadn't tried to tell anyone that he'd fallen. She'd just stood there screaming and crying until some guy who was passing by noticed and called an ambulance. Some thanks, considering he'd only wound up like this because he was protecting her. But panic did make certain people absolutely useless in a crisis. It didn't seem like the assailant had gone after her, either, so that was something.

The real problem was who this mystery attacker was. It seemed obvious she was the same person who'd been watching Toshihiko and sending him those creepy letters.

I don't know what I'll do.

He hadn't expected the stalker to make good on her threat so soon. From the letters, it seemed like she'd been aware of Mirei before now. Maybe when she'd seen them walking together, something in her had snapped? A fall from that height on a rainy day could easily have been fatal. Especially since Mirei's back had been to the attacker before he pushed her out of the way.

This woman was dangerous; that much was clear. Once he was well enough to leave the hospital and go back to work, Toshihiko would have to take steps to deal with her. For now, though, he simply closed his eyes and drifted off.

3

I never expected it to turn out like that. I just wanted to punish that stupid girl, that's all. She's caused him so much trouble. I may have said some indelicate things because of how close they were, but I know he never really had a shred of interest in that *child*.

She's nothing but a worthless slut anyway.

I don't mean that as a general insult, either. I'm using it in its original meaning—she's loose, indecent, immoral.

She said she'd gotten together with her home tutor—some boy fresh out of college, every bit as stupid as her, no doubt. And I bet he's not the only one. There are other kids who like her, and while

she's never mentioned having any sugar daddies, you just know she's the type to give it up for anyone who can pay the right price.

Mommy, you always said that having sex before you were married was only a way of practicing for the man you were really meant to be with. You said that women who lose their virginity before their wedding night will never come out on top. I think so, too.

That little tramp. She's stupid, she's not that cute, and all she'd be good for is getting married and becoming a housewife (not that there's anything wrong with that; it can be a perfectly respectable job if you do it right, but I bet she wouldn't be able to handle it). There she was, throwing away her chances of even a meager future like that. A little punishment would have been the wake-up call she needed. And I could hardly stand by while she tried to seduce him.

So…why?

Why did he protect that stupid little girl? Does he have feelings for her after all? *Her?* With that bean sprout of a body? That would make this so much worse.

Seeing him dash to the rescue like that, though… He looked more enchanting than ever. He normally walks so slowly, so leisurely. I sometimes wonder if he does it to attract extra attention, like courtesans did in olden times. But when he jumped in to save the girl, he practically flew. Those long, slender legs kicking off from the ground, his lean, muscular arm shooting out like a whip… Oh, it was wonderful. I wish I could have captured that moment so I could watch it back again and again.

I had no idea he'd lose his balance and fall after he pushed her aside. I was going to go back and help him after giving that girl what she had coming. Somehow, it didn't work out that way. She just stood there bawling like a baby until somebody else came by. The Good Samaritan gasped at the sight of him collapsed and bleeding. I don't blame him. That red, red blood on his pale skin was beautiful enough to take anyone's breath away.

I don't resent that passerby for calling it in. It's all the girl's fault in the end. It would have been nice if I had been the one to save him

instead. Normally, it's the prince who rescues the princess, but it would have been romantic even with our roles reversed. It's too bad things didn't work out that way.

He was taken to the hospital. Naturally, I went to visit him. But he said he didn't want to see anyone except his mother. I wasn't even allowed into his room.

It's not right. I mean, I'm his wife. I have a ring and everything. Our love is eternal. And even if that girl was the main reason I did what I did, he's not exactly blameless himself. Why hasn't he been home in so long? Is there something wrong with this place? It's close to where he works, and I clean it every day. I always like things to be neat and tidy. I don't think my cooking could be the problem, either. He's told me over and over again that he likes it.

As I sit there wondering what could possibly be wrong, Mommy gives me my answer.

"It's your fault."

I glare at her, but she only stares back impassively at me.

"What do you mean? What have I done?"

She smirks like I've just said the stupidest thing in the world.

"I'm not saying anything you've done is wrong."

She rests her chin in one hand, raising her glass with the other. She sips her drink slowly, little by little.

"It's what you *are* that's wrong."

A terrible wail starts rising up from the back of my throat. Mommy hears it and laughs at me even more.

I miss you so much. Won't you please come home soon?

4

While Toshihiko was hospitalized, a police detective came to speak to him. Toshihiko tried to tell the story of what happened exactly how he remembered it. The police had probably already gotten Mirei's side of it anyway. He submitted his report and was discharged. But he wasn't satisfied.

He'd been unable to convince the police that the person behind the attack was also the one sending him the letters, or that he could

potentially still be in danger. His requests that they launch a thorough investigation were completely ignored.

Apparently, his and Mirei's statements lined up enough; the part about Toshihiko falling while protecting Mirei from an unknown assailant wasn't in question. But the security cameras set up nearby hadn't shown anybody else in the vicinity. The cameras' blind spots weren't large enough for a person to hide in, so the police found it hard to believe a third party was involved. They would at least be looking into the incident a little further, since the rain that day may have obscured the footage.

After getting discharged, Toshihiko returned home and gathered up his evidence—the letters—and went to the police station. This was partly so he could watch the security footage for himself. Unfortunately, the detective was right. There was nothing to see.

The area in question was close to a kindergarten, an elementary school, and a middle school. With so many children passing through every day, surveillance was pretty tight. The cameras even had microphones attached. But the only thing he could hear in the video was Mirei's hysterical screaming. That, and something that sounded like two hard objects grinding against each other, loud enough to drown out everything else. The detective seemed to think it was the sound of the heavy rain.

Toshihiko's second reason for visiting was to urge the police to start taking his stalker problem more seriously. He was directed to the Community Safety Department, which was no help at all. They conceded the content of the letters could be seen as threatening, but then said their hands were tied so long as the stalker didn't do anything beyond that.

"That doesn't seem right to me. I got injured, you know? And this person went after one of my students just because she happened to be near me at the time."

The young officer on the other side of the desk gave him a pacifying smile.

"Please try to understand, Mr. Katayama. We have no evidence that your attacker and your stalker are the same person. I'm sorry. I know those letters are pretty deluded, but it's not like the sender has taken any physical or legal action against you, right?"

"I think that's just because I submitted a Nonacceptance of Marriage Request at the ward office."

"Ha. Seems to me like you ought to be used to this by now."

An older police officer sat down in front of Toshihiko. His name was Kamemura, if Toshihiko remembered correctly.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Toshihiko glared at him, amplifying the chilly vibe he was giving off. This was enough to make most people shrink away. The younger officer averted his eyes, but Kamemura's wry smirk didn't falter.

"Just what it sounds like. Mr. Katayama, you've come to the police for problems like this before, haven't you?"

"Yes… They've always been separate cases, though."

"That's why I said you ought to be used to it. We've explained the process to you plenty of times. We can't do a thing unless this stalker actually acts against you."

"Do you really think it's okay to wait around for that to happen? I mean, look at this letter!"

He laid the letter that ended with ***I don't know what I'll do*** on the top of the desk.

"This showed up the day before the attack. I could have died. I'm not demanding that you make an arrest right this minute. I just want you to take the danger I'm in a little more seriously."

"So you received an emotionally charged letter. Not much we can do about that."

Kamemura shifted in his seat and crossed his legs.

"Maybe we can step up the patrols in your area. Would that make you feel better?"

"I…"

Taken aback by the older man's callous attitude, Toshihiko struggled for his next words. Kamemura snorted derisively.

"Mr. Katayama, you seem to run into this kind of trouble a lot. I've heard Kanou mention your name several times."

"Like I said, those were different cases."

Kanou was a younger officer—maybe thirty or so—who used to work at the Community Safety Department. He'd treated Toshihiko kindly in the past, but he'd been transferred to a different department earlier this year.

"Different cases, yes, but you ended up withdrawing your complaints for all of them, didn't you?" Kamemura said, glaring at his watch. "I don't want to sound harsh, but don't you think your face might be to blame? Even after Kanou told me about you, I was still surprised the first time I met you in person. You're even more handsome than that What's-His-Name Yoshida. You know, the actor who's in vogue right now, the one people call a natural treasure, the kind of Adonis who only comes along once a millennium. You must *know* how attractive you are. You have to be careful how you act around people when you look like that. You could give them ideas."

"Are you saying the *victim* is to blame here? Sorry, but I doubt the rest of the department would share your opinion."

"Oh, don't go acting like you're a lawyer now. Although, you did attend a pretty good college, didn't you?"

The younger officer made tentative attempts to get his partner to back down, but Kamemura ignored him.

"For the record, no, I'm not blaming you. It's never the victim's fault. In cases like this, the culprit is one hundred percent in the wrong. But forget responsibility for a minute and think about the cause. What was it that set off this whole incident?"

He pointed at Toshihiko.

"It's that pretty face of yours. That probably sounds harsh to you. I know you can't do anything about it, but—"

"That's it, I'm done here."

Toshihiko stood up. Sitting here and talking to this rude man would only ruin his day, not to mention waste his time.

"Oh? Does this mean you've changed your mind?"

"Yeah. I'm going to file a Letter of Complaint instead."

Kamemura's composure cracked just a little. Unlike a regular incident report, a Letter of Complaint was a formal request for the Criminal Affairs Bureau to apprehend and charge the culprit. It wasn't common knowledge, but incident reports were just that—a report that some kind of criminal incident had occurred. It didn't technically include a request for the person responsible to be found or charged. The police were under no obligation to launch an investigation on the back of one.

A Letter of Complaint was a different matter. At first glance, it might seem like there was no downside to filing one. However, it required a lot more detailed documentation to get off the ground, and the victim was obliged to stay involved right up until the case went to court. The investigations team had to put in a lot of work once they received a Letter of Complaint, so it wasn't a course they usually encouraged people to take.

"You know what? Go right ahead!"

Toshihiko barely heard Kamemura's final remark as he walked out. He didn't actually intend on submitting the Letter of Complaint. It would be pointless to do so. He'd had problems with stalkers before, but the damage they caused—both physical and emotional—was never severe enough to justify any serious punishment. In the end, all he would get out of pursuing charges was a modest payment as compensation.

He didn't want to put himself through the hassle of a court case. They lasted a long time, and they took more of a toll on your stamina than you might expect. He'd prefer to settle the matter more peacefully. Somehow, though, it didn't feel like that would be an option this time. This case felt different from the others. The woman who was sending him these letters didn't come across as the kind of person who could be reasoned with.

Some stalkers were more rational than others. It was bad enough when they deluded themselves into thinking they were in a relationship with somebody they barely knew. But when they also

acted based on a skewed system of values, the less reasonable types could cause a lot of trouble.

Even when dealing with an illogical stalker, one could, over time and with mediation from third parties, get to the bottom of their true desires. From there, it was a lot easier to figure out a way to resolve things. There were private specialists who knew just how to get through to them. In fact, Toshihiko had used one several times in the past.

The specialist's process was to begin by contacting the stalker themselves. She'd question them and ask them why they were so fixated on their target. Often, it would be something along the lines of "I won't forgive him for what he did" or "I trusted him, and he betrayed me." Then the specialist would say that if they felt that strongly about it, they should bring a civil action suit against him.

They'd take her advice and consult an attorney, and gradually, they'd start to realize the things they were saying didn't add up. From there, she'd get the stalker to face up to their feelings and work through them until they finally ceased their attacks. Most of the time, all they really needed was to vent their negative emotions and process them in a healthier way. The specialist provided a safe space to help them do just that.

That approach wasn't going to work with this stalker. This woman had never directly attacked Toshihiko, never waited in a place she knew he'd be and jumped out brandishing a knife or anything like that. Even during the incident on the bridge, she'd clearly been aiming for Mirei. He wasn't the one she wanted to hurt. Setting up a meeting between his current stalker and the specialist would only expose the latter to unnecessary danger.

What the stalker *was* doing was subjecting him to nigh constant surveillance. Even now, he could feel her gaze on him. The police said she hadn't shown up in any of the surveillance footage. He was willing to believe that. Even at the time, she'd moved too fast for Toshihiko to make out anything about her, apart from that she was a

tall woman with black hair. She'd been there one minute and was gone the next, vanishing like mist.

The idea that someone capable of doing that had been watching him all this time was like a crushing weight on his heart. Clearly, the police weren't going to achieve anything, and private specialists wouldn't do much better. He'd have to handle this himself. He was confident that he'd be able to do it. The reason for that confidence lay in his second hobby—the one that was even less "normal" than his interest in the supernatural.

Until a few years ago, Toshihiko had been an accomplished stalker himself. He'd stalked his childhood friend, a woman by the name of Eiko Komiyama. Well, maybe *friend* was too strong a word; she was just his next-door neighbor. Eiko was a plain girl who was about as distinctive as a boiled egg with eyes drawn on. She studied pharmaceutical sciences at a totally average university and had no real standout attributes. Even so, Toshihiko had wanted to know everything about her.

He'd started by pretending to be friends with her brother. That gave him plenty of opportunities to hang out at her house and plant bugs in her room. He'd used them to listen in on her during the evenings. He would watch her interactions with people from afar, and when she wasn't at home, he would sneak into her room and steal her hair and nail clippings. He'd even taken a year out of college so he could have more time to observe her.

As obsessed as he'd been, Toshihiko had never harbored romantic feelings for Eiko. He didn't hate her, either, though there was definitely something that drew him to her. But if you asked him what that "something" was, he would have struggled to answer. On the other hand, if you'd asked him why he was stalking her, the answer to that was perfectly simple: It was his hobby.

Learning so much about a person, things that no one else knew—it was fun. He was aware that stalking was a crime. He'd even been on the receiving end of it himself, so he knew just how unpleasant it

could be. But once he started, he couldn't stop. He didn't *want* to stop.

Eiko had found out in the end, calling him the "lowest of the low" and "a disgusting creep." Despite those harsh words, she had a forgiving nature. Even after the truth was exposed, she would stand and chat with Toshihiko whenever she ran into him, as if none of it had never happened.

Strangely, once they became something like real friends, Toshihiko lost all interest in her. He'd apologized for his actions and removed the surveillance devices from Eiko's room. He never contacted her or her brother again. The two of them actually went missing at some point, but even before then, it had been years since he'd spoken to either of them. Toshihiko's passion lay in learning everything he could about the unknown. His spirit of inquiry had just reached such an extreme that it had become a crime in the eyes of society.

After Eiko, he moved on to other targets and did the same thing. They hadn't inspired the same level of excitement, but it had been satisfying enough. It didn't really matter whom he stalked—it was the deed itself he found so enjoyable.

Fortunately, none of these new targets ever found him out. Maybe that was because he never got as far as invading their personal space. Instead, he would pick a random social media account and use their posts and contacts to figure out their address. From there, it was a matter of hanging around their place of work or anywhere else they might be and taking pictures of them when they weren't looking. He'd done this so many times, he'd become pretty good at nailing down the specifics of a person based on limited information.

Given Toshihiko's attention-grabbing appearance, he wouldn't have been too successful as a private detective. He was confident that his observation and intel-gathering skills were on par with most pros, though. Now he could put all that experience to good use, turning the tables on his stalker by finding out her true identity.

He wasn't sure what he would do when he found out who the woman was. She might have been the source of his pain and

suffering, but she was also giving him a chance to indulge his hobby for the first time in a while. He couldn't deny it was an exciting prospect.

According to one school of thought, stalkers were most likely to target people they knew by sight at least. Celebrities and pop stars were an obvious example, but other stalkers latched on to random people they'd only ever passed on the street. Toshihiko himself had pursued random targets later in his "career," but he'd started with a childhood acquaintance. He'd been fairly close to the people who'd stalked him, too—coworkers, former classmates, people from the gym.

When he thought about it that way, the "former classmates" connection was the weakest. Toshihiko hadn't contacted anyone from school or his childhood for at least five years. He'd gotten an invitation to the class reunion when he turned thirty, but he hadn't even replied to it. It was unlikely this stalker was someone who'd randomly thought of him after all these years and had suddenly gotten obsessed with him.

He didn't go to the gym anymore, and he barely went out socially. The only acquaintances of his who were worth mentioning were from work. If the stalker really was someone who knew him, he could narrow his pool of suspects to women he worked with. That seemed like the best place to start, beginning with the ones he was closest to and working his way out.

It was almost the end of his first class after returning to work. Toshihiko cast a glance around the classroom. None of the female students seemed suspicious to him. In fact, the only time he didn't feel that clingy gaze on him was when he was in class. There was always a chance his students were simply playing innocent, however, so he couldn't eliminate them just yet. After his lecture, several students asked him if he was any worse after his accident. It was then that he noticed something.

Mirei wasn't there.

He went back to the faculty room to check the attendance records and found that she was absent today. If she was just playing hooky, that would be one thing, but she'd never missed one of Toshihiko's classes before. He couldn't help wondering about it. He doubted she blamed herself for the incident, but maybe she was avoiding him in case something similar happened again?

"Something troubling you?"

He turned around at the sound of a voice coming from behind him. It was Midori. She was wearing a vibrant cobalt-blue dress that complemented her slender figure.

"Uh, not exactly…"

Detective Kamemura's rebuke echoed in the back of his mind. "You have to be careful how you act around people when you look like that. You could give them ideas." Midori very obviously had a crush on Toshihiko. If he was honest and told her he was worried about Mirei, she might take it the wrong way and get jealous. She probably wouldn't have quite as aggressive a stance as the stalker, but he didn't want to risk getting a student involved in any more trouble.

He didn't think Midori was the kind of immature person who'd fly off the handle like that. However, even people who seemed perfectly sensible, mature, and emotionally stable could do crazy, irrational things when love was involved. And she did fall into the demographic of "women he worked with." On the other hand, his moment of hesitation was as good as admitting there was something on his mind, so he decided to come clean.

"I was wondering where Nakamura was. She was with me when I had my accident, but she wasn't in my class today. Have you seen her?"

"Mirei Nakamura? She wasn't in my class, either. Not that she ever took classes here very seriously to begin with. She never missed yours, though—how strange. Maybe she's still traumatized by what she saw? I'll see if I can find out anything."

Midori had been working at the cram school a lot longer than Toshihiko. She was a full-time employee, too, and she'd even earned the title of vice-principal. Logging into the internal system with her ID gave her access to a lot more information about the students. Standing behind Toshihiko, she leaned in close to the screen and began poking around. A deep furrow appeared in her brow.

"While you were in the hospital, her mother came here and said that she still wanted to keep Nakamura enrolled…but from the look of things, Nakamura hasn't attended a single class since then. Odd."

"Hmm…"

"Let's try contacting her parents."

Midori straightened up and stepped away from the screen. Her brow smoothed out again. Maybe she'd just been squinting hard because she didn't have her glasses on.

"Yeah, that would probably be best."

"If she's off sick, then it counts as an absence rather than a withdrawal. There's a different system in place to deal with it. I'd feel sorry for her parents if they were still paying tuition when she's not coming."

Remembering his own yearlong break from formal education to indulge his stalking habit, Toshihiko felt a twinge of shame. He tried not to let it show on his face.

"You're right. If we have to set up a meeting with them in person, could you let me do it?"

"Why?"

Midori's expression turned severe again.

"You're not her homeroom teacher. Is there some reason you want to take charge?"

The AC ruffled her hair slightly. Her locks were pure black and looked like they had never been dyed. The sight called to mind his attacker's hair, which had brushed his arm on the bridge. He looked away and noticed Midori wore a simple silver ring on her ring finger. He could have sworn she wasn't married. When they were out drinking last month, hadn't she draped herself over him and plied

him with questions about his own love life? Had she really been as drunk as she appeared that night?

Midori was a considerate person, an earnest teacher, and a dependable friend. In spite of that, Toshihiko couldn't help feeling suspicious of her. He took a breath and went on.

"It feels like my accident is what started all this. If it really is why Nakamura's taking so much time off, wouldn't it be good for her to see that I'm okay? It might help ease her mind."

She fixed him with a piercing stare for a few moments but eventually relented.

"Perhaps you're right. You do seem to be the teacher she's most attached to. Just make sure you get approval from her homeroom teacher first."

"Of course."

In his mind, Toshihiko heaved a sigh of relief. Thank goodness that had worked out. Even if Midori was really the stalker, this wouldn't have been the time to confront her. And now he'd almost certainly get to talk to Mirei again. He'd only glimpsed the attacker briefly from behind, but Mirei would have seen her head-on. In all honesty, he didn't care how the girl was feeling one way or the other. He just wanted a chance to see if she knew anything.

After finishing up his paperwork for the day, he stepped into the entrance hall and found a girl standing next to the umbrella rack. She wore a messy ponytail with the ends turned up. For a moment, he thought it was Mirei. But when he took another look at her, he realized it was an entirely different girl, although their uniforms were the same.

This was Hirona Ushijima. She seemed to be on pretty good terms with Mirei, and Toshihiko had seen them chatting together before. Hirona sprang forward like a bullet from a gun and came running up to him.

"Mr. Katayama, do you have time to talk?"

It probably had something to do with Mirei. He didn't want to take the bait too quickly and risk putting off Hirona, though.

"If there's anything you didn't understand in class, you should have asked then."

"No, come on. I'm talking about Mirei, of course."

She looked up at him beseechingly for a second. Then her face clouded over.

"I heard about…everything. Mirei was really serious about you. When she said she was gonna ask you out, I tried to talk her out of it, but…"

Toshihiko was secretly impressed. Unlike her friend, Hirona knew how to keep things in perspective. The girl went on haltingly, hesitantly.

"To be honest, when I heard you'd fallen down those stairs while you were with Mirei, I thought… I don't know, maybe you got mad at her and tried to push her but ended up falling yourself? But I don't think you'd do something like that. If you had, she wouldn't be covering for you right now."

"I see. Thanks for believing in me."

"It's not that I believe in *you*. I just don't think Mirei would be that stupid."

She sighed heavily.

"Anyway, I wanted to hear her side of the story, but she hasn't been to school since the accident. She never pays much attention, and she ditches her classes here all the time, but she's always been good about showing up every day."

"How much school has she missed, exactly?"

"All of it. Ever since that day, she hasn't shown up once."

Toshihiko had been in the hospital for three days. After the surgery, he'd needed several follow-up appointments. Then two more weeks had passed before he was allowed to return to work today. Mirei had been absent from school that whole time?

"That does seem odd."

Hirona nodded.

"Yeah, our teacher—the one at our school, not here—tried to stop me, but I went to her house to check on her, and…"

"Hold on a minute."

Toshihiko glanced around them. He couldn't feel that clingy gaze on him. But the stalker was bound to find him sooner or later. What if she attacked Hirona this time? He chose his next words carefully.

"If we talk here, there's a chance the other teachers or some parents could overhear us and get the wrong idea. This is going to be a long story, right? Let's call this a 'consultation session' and talk in one of the classrooms. Can you call your parents and let them know you'll be home late?"

Hirona fell silent for a moment as she considered his proposal. Then after a quick phone call home, she followed Toshihiko into an empty classroom.

*

It must've been around one thirty on a Saturday. I remember, 'cause it was a half day that day. The first thing that struck me was how nice Mirei's house was. Her dad's employed at some big hospital, and her mom's a doctor, too; the two of them work together. She's kind of the black sheep of her family. She's got two brothers, both older than her, and they're real honor students. She's basically left to fend for herself most of the time. I know she's not the smartest girl in the world, and her temper can be real nasty sometimes, but I just can't hate her, y'know? She's got her good points, too. But I'm getting off topic.

The point is, it's real luxurious, that house of hers. It's got a big black front gate with spikes on the top. It's the kind of place with a separate front yard *and* courtyard. My family's not poor or anything, but her house really felt like something from a different world than what I'm used to.

I knew Mirei's folks wouldn't be at home during the day, so I thought I had a good chance of seeing her. I'd tried going the day of the accident, but her mom turned me away. She was all, "Please refrain from coming to the house until my daughter is ready to see

you.” She was really intense about it, too. I decided to wait until she wasn’t around before I made my second attempt.

Well, my little bet paid off. I rang the doorbell, and Mirei answered. She didn’t say anything at first, but I could tell it was her. If it had been her mom or a maid or something, they would have said something, right?

“Mirei, it’s me. Let me in.”

She didn’t reply, but I could just barely hear her breathing over the intercom. There was also this weird, like, background noise. Kind of a grinding, like there was a machine on in another room. I was just about to ring the bell again, maybe tell her I had some limited edition donuts from Mister Donut for her, but then the gate opened.

Mirei was waiting for me at the front door, and she looked terrible. All thin and worn-out. Her face had this yellowish tinge to it, and her skin was dry and flaking; she looked like she’d aged about thirty years since I saw her last.

“Mirei, what happened to you?”

She didn’t answer, just beckoned me toward her. I figured that meant it was okay for me to come in, so I followed her inside. We went up the stairs, and I think I tried to make small talk, but I don’t really remember if she said anything at all. That grinding sound was really loud, which made it hard to concentrate. It was a little more bearable when we got inside Mirei’s room and closed the door.

“Why did you stop coming to school?”

I didn’t want to sit on her bed without permission, so I took a seat on the floor instead. But when I looked up, she wasn’t there. I did kind of a double take, but she definitely wasn’t in the room anymore. At first, I thought she’d slipped out to get us some snacks, and I just hadn’t noticed. I waited a while, but it didn’t seem like she was coming back.

“Mirei…?”

I opened the door and called out to her. There was no answer. The grinding noise was louder than before, too, since the bedroom door wasn’t muffling it anymore. I got scared and closed the door again,

but it still didn't get any quieter. I tried telling myself it was just construction work going on nearby. Sometimes, I can't hear the TV at my house when there's maintenance work happening with the drains outside. This was a lot louder, but I figured it might be something like that.

"They adding another wing to this house or what? Is it not big enough for them already?"

I was muttering that to myself, when I heard a quiet laughing behind me. Not a happy laugh, though, more like someone was laughing *at* me. I thought Mirei had hidden in the closet to watch me bumbling around, and that seriously ticked me off. I spun around to give her a piece of my mind.

But Mirei wasn't in the closet. She was in bed, all wrapped up with only her head showing above the blankets. I was going to say something, but then I saw her face. She looked pale, and she was shivering. That wasn't the face of someone who'd been making fun of me a few seconds before. In the end, I still complained a little. I might have been harsher than I needed to, so she wouldn't notice how scared I'd been.

"Wh-why? Why…?"

Mirei was shivering even worse now; her lips were practically blue. She was so quiet, I wouldn't have been able to make out what she was saying if she hadn't been repeating the same word over and over again.

"Uh, why what?"

She pointed at me.

"Why…are *you* here, Hirona…?"

She was talking in this weird, disjointed way. I didn't understand what she was trying to say. I tried to get her to speak to me, but she just kept repeating herself.

"Why…? It's not right… Why?"

That's when I started getting impatient and snapped at her.

"We just came up the stairs together! What, are you going senile?"

Those words had barely left my mouth when she screamed. It was way louder and more high-pitched than I was expecting. It even drowned out the grinding noise for a second.

"Seriously, what is going on with you?"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"It's not right… Not right… Not right…"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"Just talk to me."

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"Why… Why… Why?"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"I don't understand."

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"I locked the door, and it didn't do any good!"

She yelled that last part and broke down crying. I don't think I've ever seen a person cry that hard before. It wasn't like she was sad, more like she was going crazy. And the whole time, that grinding was getting louder. I'd been able to shrug it off as construction work when I was feeling calm, but with the way Mirei was acting, it was too much for me. All I wanted was to get out of there and let her deal with whatever it was on her own.

"You mean you locked the door, but I came in anyway? Sorry about that. I'll leave."

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

I turned to go, but Mirei grabbed my arm and squeezed really hard.

"You're hurting me!" I said.

"Don't go!"

Her face was one big mess of snot and tears at this point.

"You let her in! You can't leave me alone now!"

"Huh?"

You know how thin Mirei is, but I couldn't shake her off.

"There!"

She grabbed my head and turned it toward the door. All of a sudden, the grinding stopped. There was a tall woman standing in the doorway. Mirei screamed. Then the tall woman laughed. She laughed, and she thanked me for letting her in. She moved her jaw back and forth, and I had this moment of clarity where I realized the noise I'd been hearing was the grinding of her teeth. I think I was too scared to focus on anything else. Her jaw looked wrong, like it was dislocated. It didn't look like a normal human face at all.

Mirei screamed again, and I fainted.

Fainting is really weird, you know. It's like your consciousness just cuts out. When I came to, someone was shaking me by the shoulders. I opened my eyes, and it turned out it was Mirei's mom. I was so surprised, I got back on my feet before I knew what I was doing. I looked around, but the tall lady wasn't there anymore. As for Mirei, she was back in bed. She was still pale, but she seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

"How did you get in here?" Mirei's mom asked, her voice as cold as ice.

"I, uh… Mirei let me in…"

"That's not possible. She's been asleep all afternoon." Her mom sighed. "Anyway, I believe I told you before I don't want you coming around here. Didn't your parents teach you any manners? You're causing a lot of trouble for us."

Normally, I'd have gotten mad at her, but it had all been too much for me. I said sorry and ran straight out the door. I had no idea what was going on anymore. My mom and my brother said I must have been dreaming, but I don't think I was. Look, I still have the marks on my arm from where Mirei grabbed me.

Also, when I was leaving her house, I heard it again. That *krsh, krsh, krsh* noise.

*

As her story went on, Hirona grew more and more agitated, and she was practically sobbing by the time she finished. Toshihiko was feeling pretty uptight, too. The tall woman the girl had seen was probably his mysterious stalker. And the grinding noise, that could have been the sound he'd heard in the surveillance footage. She really had been after Mirei that day, not him.

Infidelity was a strange thing. The wronged party often didn't resent the person who'd cheated on them as much as the person their partner had cheated with. This stalker seemed to fit that pattern. And in her case, that resentment made her violent and unpredictable.

"You think maybe I saw a ghost or something?" Hirona asked, her voice quivering. "Have I been cursed?"

"I don't think so," Toshihiko replied bluntly.

Her story definitely had an uncanny quality to it. And with everything he knew about the supernatural, Toshihiko did believe there were some things conventional knowledge couldn't explain. When he thought about the situation rationally, however, he realized it was a little too soon to label the stalker as a ghost.

Points like Mirei being asleep, the front door being locked, and the tall woman having an "inhuman" face—they were all *curious*. There was no denying that. But calling them *supernatural* would just be forcing fragments of information to fit a pattern without looking at the bigger picture. That said, he wasn't ready to completely dismiss Hirona's experience as a dream or hallucination like her family had.

The one thing he could say for sure was that the woman stalking him was far more dangerous, aggressive, and resourceful than he'd given her credit for.

"Thanks for telling me all this. You're going to be fine, Ushijima."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because it was only Nakamura who was being targeted. That strange lady hasn't come back to harass you again, has she?"

Hirona nodded stiffly. Toshihiko went on.

"I think *I'm* the one she really wants. So I don't want you to be seen with me. It's too dangerous. Just in case, can you call your parents and get them to pick you up?"

"Yeah. My dad ought to be able to come."

"Good. I'll tell the police as well, but you don't need to get involved with this any more than you already have. I know you must be worried about your friend, but she wouldn't want you putting yourself in danger. Think of how sad she'd be if she knew."

"Personally, I think Mirei's more the type to be like, 'Why are you fine when all this crazy stuff's happening to *me*? No fair!'"

Hirona smiled for the first time that day. She contacted her father, and after a little while, he arrived to take her home. She still looked somewhat shaken up, but she no longer had the desperate look in her eyes as when she'd called out to Toshihiko at the entrance.

Glancing at his watch, Toshihiko realized it was already past ten PM. He locked up the cram school and began his commute home, but his mind kept going back to Hirona's story. The uncanny elements weighed heavily on his mind. He didn't feel that clingy gaze on him now, but what if…?

He hailed a passing taxi and got in. It would be more expensive, but he really didn't feel like traveling by train today. He was so scared that he couldn't even bring himself to look out the window on the way back. He kept thinking about the letters. Ever since the day of the accident, the strange letters had stopped coming. Presumably, that was because the stalker had become too obsessed with Mirei to focus on writing to him.

By the time the taxi dropped him off, Toshihiko still hadn't come to any new conclusions. As he was taking his door key out of his bag, something fell at his feet. Looking carefully at the door under the light of the sensor, he could make out traces of some kind of sticky, glue-like substance. He had a bad feeling about this.

Something was stuck to the door. Probably one of that crazy woman's letters. He really didn't want to look down and find out what. When he finally did, his nostrils were assaulted by a foul odor.

It was sort of rusty… No, less metallic, more raw. Like it had come from something organic.

There on the ground, sticking to his shoe, was a used menstrual pad, covered in dark patches of dried blood.

5

Toshihiko spotted Kirara Kawahara walking down the long corridor that led to the staff room. He came to a stop and ducked into the shadows. Kawahara had started working at the cram school sometime last summer. Apparently, she was originally part of a theater group and had aspired to become an actress, but she hadn't been very successful. After turning twenty, she'd given up on her dream and gotten an admin job instead.

She was attractive and had a voice that carried well while still sounding delicate. There was something vital and energetic about her, too. She readily volunteered for physically demanding tasks and was popular with both her male and female coworkers.

"I'm not feeling too good. I'm just going to head to the bathroom," said Kawahara.

"All right," said another of his coworkers.

"Sorry, it's my time of the month."

Toshihiko hadn't planned to stand there and eavesdrop, but now he'd heard that, he began to feel queasy. The bloody pad he'd found by his door rose up in his memory. Even now, a day later, the smell was still fresh in his mind. If he wasn't careful, the nausea would get too much for him. And he could hardly call in sick after all the time he'd taken off lately. The association with sanitary products wasn't the only reason seeing Kawahara had set him off, either.

Kawahara and Toshihiko used to date. She was the one who had initiated the relationship. Unlike Midori and the other female staff members, she hadn't put Toshihiko on any kind of pedestal. He'd found that quite refreshing, so he agreed to go out with her. In the end, that had proved to be a mistake. After they'd slept together, she'd shown her true colors.

It turned out Kawahara wanted him all to herself. She tried to control every aspect of his life and wanted them to do everything in each other's presence. She also forced him to make an Instagram account, and then one day, he discovered she was using it to post pictures that made it seem like they had been together since before they started going out. He deleted his account and got her to take down any pictures of him, but the damage was done. As far as he was concerned, she'd gone from being an adorable little squirrel to a filthy rat.

Her lack of a strong attachment to him had been what had drawn Toshihiko to her in the first place, and it had all been a lie. His ardor cooled considerably once he realized that. Breaking up with her hadn't been easy. Kawahara was perceptive and would skillfully change the subject whenever the conversation started going that way. In the end, he'd been forced to do it over a messaging app instead. He sent a message saying he'd found someone else, then blocked her.

After that, baseless rumors that he'd gotten a woman pregnant and then dumped her started circulating, but they disappeared before very long. According to Midori, some people thought Toshihiko's lack of normal human compassion was only natural given his supremely good looks. She'd also been the one who'd told him about the rumors. It wasn't something that had endeared her to him. More importantly, he really didn't want to have a confrontation with Kawahara right now.

As Toshihiko brought his thoughts back to the present, a new suspicion welled up in his mind. Kawahara had just said she was on her period, hadn't she? It all made sense. She could be the one who'd sent him all those letters and the menstrual pad last night.

A door creaked open, and Toshihiko froze. He heard footsteps, loud at first, but getting more distant. He risked a glance down the corridor and saw Kawahara walking away. This was the best chance he was going to get. There wasn't anyone else around. He could slip into the women's bathroom and rummage through the trash without

anyone seeing. But the moment he took a step out of his hiding place…

"Mr. Katayama."

He almost screamed but somehow managed to suppress it. He turned around to see Yuuki Sayama standing behind him. The other man seemed to notice how distressed he was and looked down dejectedly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"I-it's fine…"

Toshihiko really didn't mind Sayama interrupting. If anything, he was grateful. He'd been on the verge of going home with a bag full of trash. While he didn't feel any guilt about the act itself—he wasn't doing it for sketchy reasons, after all—he didn't want anyone to catch him at it. And he'd been so sure he was alone just now. Detectives and PIs were supposed to be able to erase their presences and pass unnoticed, but Toshihiko hadn't realized even a regular guy like Sayama could do it without meaning to.

What if Sayama wasn't the only one Toshihiko had failed to notice? If someone else had walked in on him, he doubted he would have been able to stay calm or come up with a believable excuse. The jig would have been up. Again, he wouldn't have felt guilty, but stealing a bag of trash from the women's room wasn't the kind of thing that would be seen as merely eccentric or lacking in compassion. He'd have to take responsibility for acting as strange as that.

"So, did you need something?" Trying to settle his nerves, Toshihiko changed the subject.

"Not really… I just saw you and thought I'd say hello. I'm sorry. You must be pretty creeped out by me, huh?"

"What? No, not at all."

Sayama wasn't as dazzlingly attractive as Toshihiko, but he had the kind of looks that most people would find appealing. His smile was bright and open—like it was reflecting his true nature as a person. He knew how to talk to people or, rather, how to listen to them. He never said anything to hurt others, and he always seemed

to cheer up whomever he talked to. It was no wonder people naturally gravitated toward him. Not like Toshihiko, who only seemed to attract trouble.

Despite his friendly nature, Sayama had a habit of putting himself down, and sometimes, a dark look would come to his eyes. He didn't talk about his personal life much. Once, when he and Toshihiko had been out drinking, he said he'd been through "what you might call a bit of bullying" in the past. It was hard to believe anyone would want to pick on someone like Sayama. Then again, there were always people who resented those who were popular. Kids could be cruel, and he was still clearly feeling the effects of it all these years later.

When Toshihiko said he wasn't creeped out at all, Sayama broke into a smile. He was so expressive and easy to read; Toshihiko found it quite endearing.

"Well, I guess we should get going."

With Sayama now at his side, Toshihiko's brain began whirling. He still didn't know if the person who'd been causing all this trouble was human or something else. The letters and the menstrual pad seemed to point to a human perpetrator. That was the kind of thing you needed a flesh-and-blood body to carry out. On the other hand, the attack on the bridge and Hirona's experience suggested a more supernatural presence at work.

Maybe all these incidents were unrelated, and Toshihiko was just trying to connect them arbitrarily? The only thing he felt sure of was that the culprit had to be female.

Suddenly, that metallic smell tickled the back of his nasal cavity again. He furrowed his brow and stopped walking, drawing a concerned look from Sayama. Was the strange odor just a phantom smell, a trick of his imagination? Was he letting the person—or whatever it was—behind this harassment mess with his head? It was looking less and less likely that he'd find a definitive answer on his own.

As he thought over his recent actions one more time, something occurred to Toshihiko. Why had he been about to steal the trash from the ladies' room and take it home with him? Well, because he thought he might find a used menstrual pad that matched the one that had been stuck to his door. He hadn't explicitly thought about it at the time, but now that he was putting it into words, that was definitely the impulse he'd been following.

And he just so happened to know a man who specialized in that kind of scientific approach to problem solving. It would probably be worth it to pursue the paranormal angle as well. As luck would have it, he had connections in that area, too.

"It's nothing."

Toshihiko assured Sayama he was fine and took a deep breath. No strange scents in the air now—just the air freshener coming from the bathroom.



Chapter 2:
Seeing Is Believing

1

Summer had begun, but the heat was not yet oppressive. The weather was warm, bright, and fresh. A perfect Sunday. Once services finished at Pádraig Aoba Church, the courtyard became lively as the congregation filed out to chat and catch up with each other. Kouki Aoyama recalled his old theology professor lamenting how fewer and fewer people were going to church these days. Aoyama smiled, relieved that his family's church had escaped such a fate.

Pádraig Aoba had been founded by Aoyama's great-grandfather, an Irish priest named Diarmuid O'Flaherty, who had come to Japan to help spread Christianity. It was currently managed by Aoyama's father, the third generation of the family to do so. One of the church's key characteristics was the lovely way the light streamed in through the skylight, making the place seem warm even in winter.

Another was that it was one of the rare Protestant churches to perform demonic exorcisms.

It was Aoyama's late grandfather who had started the business of driving out demons. When the typical Japanese person thought of exorcisms, their mind probably went to western horror movies or the exotic practices featured on TV during the *Souls and Spirits* summer special. In other words, it was not the kind of thing that was ever likely to affect them in their everyday lives. Even as a subject of passing interest, a lot of people felt it was a little too dubious to take seriously.

The Pádraig Aoba Church had become rather famous online, and Aoyama had been teased about it more than once while he was in school. He didn't mind, though. He'd never been ashamed of his family's background, and demons *did* exist. Twice in his life, he'd witnessed a demonic possession in person—once as a child and once as an adult.

Real exorcisms were nowhere near as theatrical as the ones depicted in fiction or medieval art. Aoyama's grandfather had always started by giving proper counseling to the people who came to him to determine whether they were really possessed. A lot of the time, it was just emotional stress or postsickness exhaustion making them see things where none existed. His grandfather could then put them in touch with an appropriate medical practitioner to resolve the case that way.

It was only on very rare occasions that the problem turned out to be genuinely demonic. Aoyama's grandfather had been an earnest man, and in spite of his online fame, he didn't receive a lot of hate mail, and his practitioners didn't get harassed. Aoyama was proud to be related to him.

"Hey, what're you doing spacing out over here?"

At that moment, he heard a voice and felt a jab in his side. It was his sister, Shouko. While Aoyama had a pale, youthful appearance that made him look much younger than his twenty-seven years, Shouko took after their mother and had a more tanned complexion.

She was married but still came home to visit and help out fairly often. Despite her sharp tongue, Aoyama was glad to have her around.

"People are saying the sandwiches and soup were really good. Not bad for a man!"

"It's old-fashioned to think of cooking as purely women's work."

"I didn't say it was, did I?" She gave him another playful jab.

"You're not too dependable and kinda flaky, and you keep going back and forth on whether you're going to take over from Dad or not. But you're good at cooking, so you'd probably make a decent housewife if all else fails."

Shouko smiled mischievously and went on.

"Why don't you just get together with your beloved Rumi? She's a big eater, so you two would be a good match."

"Hey, she's my boss!" Aoyama protested, blushing hard. Shouko continued to leer at him with a devilish grin.

Rumi Sasaki was one of the reasons he was wavering over becoming a full-time minister at the church. She was his business partner, and together, the two of them ran the Sasaki Agency, a consulting firm specializing in paranormal activity.

Rumi had gone to the same college as Aoyama; he'd met her while she was a tutor in Professor Saitou's seminars. Professor Haruhiko Saitou was a prominent folklore studies expert, but he was more well-known for his side gig—appearing in various media outlets to talk about the supernatural. Aoyama had taken the class more or less on a whim, but Rumi absolutely adored the professor.

Even well into his sixties, Professor Saitou was an active man whose skin had a healthy sheen. He was certainly eccentric, but Rumi was no less so. If anything, she went beyond eccentric and came across as outright weird. She'd turned thirty-four this year, though no one would ever guess based on her appearance. She could have easily gotten away with claiming she was in her fifties or in her teens.

Her age wasn't the only ambiguous thing about her appearance—her gender was, too. She always wore a dirty gray sweater and thick glasses, with her hair tied in a messy ponytail. It was almost as if she'd chosen to discard any trace of traditional femininity. She was an odd duck and lacked womanly charm, but Aoyama held a special place in his heart for her nonetheless.

First and foremost, Rumi had comprehensive knowledge on a wide variety of subjects, and though her theatrical way of speaking could be off-putting, talking to her was always an interesting experience. Back in Aoyama's student days, her expertise had saved him countless times when he'd hit a wall with his studies. She'd also literally saved his life.

It had happened during the only demonic possession he'd seen as an adult. The demon had possessed a young man Rumi was acquainted with, screeching in an unnatural voice and going on a murderous rampage. Together with his grandfather—still alive at the time—they'd managed to get things under control again.

But partway through the exorcism, the demon had attacked Aoyama. As he'd stared death in the face, someone had stepped in to save him, heedless of the danger—none other than Rumi herself. Ever since then, he had not only held a deep respect for her but also considered her something of a guardian angel.

Starting the agency had been his idea. He'd suggested it when Rumi told him she wasn't planning on becoming a folklorist and wanted to pursue her interests in a more active way. Though she hadn't explicitly asked him to, he handled the admin side of things almost entirely on his own. The two of them had already solved a handful of paranormal cases.

Rumi didn't think of herself like a Ghostbuster; she didn't go chasing down psychic phenomena in person. Not if she could help it. Most of the time, she would use her impressive store of knowledge to pinpoint the cause of the problem, figure out an appropriate solution, and contact a specialist to carry it out. That ability to make connections where no one else could was her true strength. Aoyama

had never once seen her fail. In all the dangerous situations he'd been in since the possession, Rumi had always been there to bail him out.

There was one downside—Rumi believed evil was drawn to the beautiful. If there was no one more attractive than Aoyama around, then he would be used as bait to draw out whatever evil presence was causing trouble. In other words, she was often the one who put him in danger in the first place, so he really didn't owe Rumi any gratitude. But he was a fundamentally good-natured guy and still considered her a brave, kind, and borderline angelic human being.

A couple of months back, they'd taken a case to rescue a young woman from some kind of new age religious group. The leader of the cult commanded supernatural powers, and the incident had turned out to be much larger in scope than they'd expected. It had even been on the news. And once again, Rumi played the decisive role in saving the victim, one Emi Shimamoto.

When Aoyama had first seen Emi, her confidence had been so low that it seemed like her entire sense of self was in danger of fading away. Now, though, she was making her own decisions and moving forward with her life. She'd become an active member of the church's Bible-study group and came by to help out on her days off work. That, too, was proof—if proof was needed—of Rumi's inherent goodness, so far as Aoyama was concerned. Anyone who knew her would surely agree.

"No? I think you two would make a great couple."

Shouko continued to tease her brother, enjoying how bashful he was being.

"Don't get me wrong, I had my doubts about her at first. Where did this strange lady get off luring my adorable little brother away from his family calling? But I'm okay with it now. Even with the weird job you're doing, you could still be a minister someday. Besides, most people think of running this church as a pretty weird job, too. And Rumi might be a little strange, but she's fun with it, and she's about a billion times more together than you."

"Just because you think it's a good idea doesn't mean she'd feel the same."

"Oh-ho, I notice you purposely avoided mentioning *your* thoughts on the matter. Come on, tell Big Sis how you really feel. You like her, right?"

Shouko rolled up the pile of church flyers she was carrying and poked Aoyama under the arms several times. He was about to tell her to knock it off, when something interrupted him.

"Hey, Kouki!"

There was a *thud* as someone charged into him from behind.

"Heh-heh, did I surprise you?"

"Nanaka… That hurt, you know."

A broad smile spread across Nanaka Yokozawa's face. She was the one who had tackled him at full force. Nanaka was a fourth-grade elementary school student, and her parents were regulars at the Pádraig Aoba Church. She regularly attended the Bible studies and English classes held at the church every week. Normally, she was a polite, earnest girl who took care of the younger boys in the congregation. She only really showed this more childlike side around Aoyama.

"Well, I don't want to get in your way. I'd better be going," Shouko said, giving Nanaka a pat on the head. Aoyama heaved a sigh, relieved to be free of his sister's persistent questioning.

"I kinda wanted to see Shouko, too, but it's mostly you I need to talk to today, Kouki. This should work out fine."

A serious look came to Nanaka's childish face.

"If it's something you don't want other people overhearing, should we go to the reception room?"

She didn't say anything and just nodded. The reception room was where Aoyama's grandfather, in life, had taken people to hear troubles they couldn't tell anyone else, listening on the other side of a latticed screen. People didn't often go there for advice anymore, and the room was mostly used for the children's Bible-study group and other activities.

They should probably let her parents know where they were going. Aoyama cast a glance around, but the girl pulled on his arm and shook her head.

"Mom and Dad aren't with me today."

"Oh, really?"

Hesitating for a moment, he remembered something. Back when his grandfather had done exorcisms, the man would set up security cameras so the victim's relatives would be able to watch what happened. The cameras weren't in use anymore, but they were probably still around. In this day and age, you couldn't be too careful—a grown man taking a little girl away into a separate room without parental consent was bound to raise some eyebrows.

Aoyama found his sister, who was still chatting with some of the visitors, and asked her about the cameras. Sure enough, they were no longer in use. He told Shouko that Nanaka wanted to talk to him about something in private. She nodded in agreement. The whole time, Nanaka didn't say a word, her mouth a firm horizontal line. It was hard to believe this was the same girl who'd playfully barged into Aoyama just a short while ago.

When Aoyama and Nanaka entered the reception room, Nanaka didn't go to the round, red plastic chair she usually used. Instead, she sat down on one side of the wooden lattice screen that the adults used. Maybe she was trying to show how serious she was about this. Aoyama went along with it and settled on the other side.

"What's on your mind? You can tell me anything."

That was how his grandfather had begun these sessions. Aoyama did his best to imitate not just the words his grandfather would use, but also the man's kindly manner as best he could.

*

There's a scary story that's been going around at my school lately. It started off with the "Seven Mysteries" of the school.

1. If you go to school at night to pick up something you forgot, you'll be able to get to your classroom like normal, but on the way back, the stairs leading down will go on forever. You have to go down the opposite side of the building, or you'll get sucked into another world.

2. If you go to the gym and play basketball at midnight, an extra team member who wasn't there before will appear. If you ignore them and keep playing, the ball will turn into the extra player's head.

3. If you go to the computer lab when no one else is around, hands will reach out of the computers and try to drag you inside.

4. If you're outside the music room at 4:44 AM when no one else is around, you'll hear "Für Elise" being performed inside. If you hear the tune four times, you'll die.

5. Sometimes, a strange lunchtime announcement will play, even when there's no one in the broadcast room. If you don't cover your ears as soon as it comes on, something bad will happen to you.

6. If you go to the bathroom on the third floor and knock three times on the third stall, a voice will say, "Who is it?" If you answer, you'll be dragged into the toilet and die.

7. Anyone who learns the seventh mystery will die.

It's weird for the seventh mystery in a list of seven to be missing, right? But this one friend of mine says it's been that way ever since her big sister and even her mom went to our school. It says you'll die if you learn about it, so we figured anyone who knew what it was must've died a long time ago.

Usually, when scary rumors start going around, it all goes back to this one kid, Miki. Miki's…kind of strange and likes to talk a lot but has plenty of friends. About a month ago, Miki found out what the seventh mystery was. The other kids all wanted to hear about it, but Miki just smirked and said, "Nah, it's too dangerous. It's better if you don't know."

Of course, that only made everyone even more curious. But the more we asked, the more Miki stayed quiet, giving us that same cheeky grin. At some point, this rowdy group of boys said Miki was probably lying anyway. They argued about it, and the boys were all, "If you found out the seventh mystery, how come you're not dead?"

Of course, Miki's the kind of kid who has an answer for everything.

"I found a surefire way to prevent it. 'Cause I'm an expert."

That didn't convince the boys, though, and eventually, Miki got tired of being called a liar.

"Okay, if you really want to know, I'll tell you. Anyone who has the guts, come to the broadcast room tonight."

I actually didn't want to hear about it, so at first, I didn't think I'd go. I've never really liked scary stories, and if the rumors were true, I might die just from hearing it. The only reason I went along was because I couldn't say no. There's this girl Ema, who always acts like a princess, and she said, "You want to hear it, too, right, Nanaka? You *have* to come. If you don't, I won't be your friend anymore."

If Ema decided I wasn't her friend, everyone else in class would ignore me. What was I supposed to do? But then when I got there, the only ones who showed up were the boys who'd called Miki a liar, Ema, and me. Why had she invited me specifically? Apparently, she hadn't. She asked the other kids to come, too, but they all had some excuse not to, like needing to do chores at home or go to their grandma's funeral.

I know it's not very nice to tell lies, but I kind of wish I'd come up with something like that. But now I was there, I was getting curious, so I decided I might as well stay. Miki was an expert, after all, so we'd probably be okay.

This was the story we heard that night.

There once was a lady named Haruko who lived happily with her son, Taro. Her son was in the third grade at Aoba South Elementary School. One day, Haruko cooked Taro his favorite apple pie and

waited for him to return from school. Normally, he came home right away, but it got to five o'clock, then six, and there was still no sign of him.

Haruko went out to look for her missing son. She asked any Aoba South Elementary kids she passed on the road where he was, but they all pretended not to know. His mom didn't know it, but Taro was being bullied really bad, and everyone was too scared to get involved.

Eventually, she got to the school and ran to Taro's classroom. There was nobody there. But the cleaning supplies locker had been tipped over, face down on the floor. Drawing on all her strength, Haruko managed to get it upright again. She opened the door, and within…was Taro.

His face was ghostly white, and he was just lying there like a broken doll. On the inside of the door, written in red, were the words SAVE ME MOMMY*. Taro's bullies had shoved him in the locker, where he'd died from the lack of air. The last thing he ever did was pry off one of his fingernails and use his blood to try and write a message to his mother.*

Haruko went to the teachers and the police and begged them to find the bullies who had done this. But they refused to help, calling Taro's death an unfortunate accident and nothing more. From then on, Haruko started to act strange. Every day when school got out, she would go to the school gates and ask the students for help.

"Help me find the boy."

One day, on her way to the school, she was hit by a car and died.

That night, one of Taro's former classmates—who we'll call Kid A—saw Haruko in his dreams.

"Help me find the boy," she said. Kid A tried to refuse, but inside the dream, he was powerless to resist.

On the first night, she told him to cross the road by Aoba Lake and look inside the church there. Kid A didn't find anything.

On the second night, she told him to climb the jungle gym in Northside Park and look there. Kid A didn't find anything.

On the third night, she told him to go to the pedestrian footbridge and search the third stairway from the right. Kid A didn't find anything.

On the fourth night, she told him to go behind the citizens' center and search the big parking lot there. Kid A didn't find anything.

On the fifth night, she told him to search outside the convenience store on Taisho Street. Kid A didn't find anything.

On the sixth night, she told him to go around the back of the Ciel Candy Store and search the drain there. Kid A didn't find anything.

On the seventh night, she told him to look inside his own house. Kid A didn't find anything.

The next morning, Kid A was found lying cold and dead in his bed. As punishment for not finding Taro, Haruko had sent him to hell.

After that, Haruko showed up in the dreams of another kid, B. Just like Kid A, he spent the first two nights searching like she told him, but he never found anything. Kid B was so frightened that he told his friend Kid C about it before he went to bed on the third day. Kid B didn't see Haruko in his dreams that night. Instead, Haruko showed up in Kid C's dreams, making the same request as always.

"Help me find the boy."

If anyone who was being haunted by Haruko told someone at school about it, Haruko would begin haunting them instead. But if they didn't tell anyone, they'd eventually be sent to hell, just like Kid A.

Within a week of hearing this story, you'll start to see Haruko in your dreams.

According to Miki, that was our school's seventh mystery. It made me *really* scared. Unlike the other mysteries, this story was weirdly detailed. All the spots Haruko told Kid A to look were real places we knew. The reason I can remember everything is because Miki printed it out. I don't know why, but Miki gave a copy to everyone who'd gathered there that night. Somehow, that only made things scarier.

The boys went quiet. They were going to throw their papers away, but Miki yelled that Haruko would curse them if they did. We kept hold of our copies when we heard that. We all went home without really talking about it.

But then—I think it was the day after the next day—Ema came up to me. She looked really worried, so I asked her what was wrong.

"I had the Haruko dream!"

I asked her if she was okay, but it was weird. She just wouldn't settle down.

"And I already told Rui about it!" she said.

Rui's a girl from the group Ema always hangs around with. That night, Haruko appeared in Rui's dreams. Then she told some other kid about it. I was really getting scared. I couldn't tell anyone about it. As scary as it all was, I didn't want to pass Haruko to some other kid and risk sending them to hell in my place.

I'm not actually going to hell, am I? You told me in our Bible-study class that hell is only for devils and sinners. I might not always be a good girl, but I'm not a bad one, either. So…I won't go to hell, will I?

*

Nanaka was trembling. Once upon a time, Aoyama supposed, he'd been like her. Innocent enough to take the Bible at face value and believe in heaven and hell as literal truths. It was probably the kind of cliché every generation spouted at some point, but he'd assumed kids these days weren't so accepting of stuff like that. He found the idea that Nanaka was still so innocent quite moving. He thought hard, searching for the right words.

"Sure is a scary story."

No matter what kind of bizarre problems people had brought his grandfather, he'd always started by trying to build a rapport between them. Nanaka nodded absently. The cuffs of her thin cardigan were creased where she'd been gripping them tightly.

"We had 'Seven Mysteries' stories when I was in school, too."

"You did…?"

"Yeah. I went to Aoba South Elementary, just like you. Ours were a little different, although we also didn't have a seventh one."

"Wow, I didn't know… Was Haruko in any of them?"

"Uh… No, I've never heard that story before…"

Nanaka's face clouded over, and Aoyama hurried to course-correct.

"But there *was* a story a lot like hers."

Technically, he wasn't lying. A story that supposedly cursed the person who heard it wasn't all that rare. The most famous example was probably "Kashima-san." There were lots of different variations, but most commonly, the tale involved a lady named Reiko Kashima, who was driven by a man's abuse to fling herself into the path of a train, hoping to end her life. The oncoming train sliced through her torso but didn't kill her, and she spent many agonizing hours lying there before finally succumbing to blood loss.

People who heard this story would supposedly encounter Reiko at night, and she would ask them questions that required specific answers.

"Do you need your arms?"

"I'm using them."

"Do you need your legs?"

"I'm using them."

"Who told you my story?"

"It was Reiko Kashima."

Unless they answered the questions in the above manner, Reiko would rip off the person's arms and legs and leave them to die. Aoyama had first heard that story from his sister. He'd been afraid to fall asleep for several days afterward. But he needn't have worried—it was all made-up. None of it ever actually happened.

He did his best to reassure Nanaka there was no need for her to be afraid. Her friends were probably only pretending they'd seen Haruko just to freak her out, like Shouko had done to him when they were little. Aoyama had been the kind of kid others enjoyed teasing, and he got the feeling Nanaka was similar.

He was hoping all this would put the girl at ease a little, but when he glanced at her face, she looked as tense as ever. In fact, perhaps she was even gloomier. Then she opened her mouth and uttered a strangled, wordless cry, like that of a dying bird.

"What's the matter?!"

"I-I'm sorry… I'm sorry, I'm sorry…"

Her face was white as a sheet. She was shaking like a leaf.

"I told you… I told you the story, Kouki. What do I do now? You… you haven't done anything wrong. You were so nice, listening to me. You didn't make fun of me for it, and I…"

Sobbing and sniffling, Nanaka apologized over and over again.

"It's all right. The story said it only worked if you told someone *at school*, didn't it? I'm a grown-up, and I'm not a teacher, so I'll be fine. Besides, this whole thing is just made-up. It's not like anything's really going to happen."

"Kouki… Thank you. Thanks for trying to make me feel better. But…you're wrong."

She gripped her scrunched-up cuffs even tighter.

"I've seen her."

"What?"

The girl looked Aoyama dead in the eyes.

"Haruko. She's already in my dreams."

Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes and started to run down her face.

"Tonight…will be the second night."

2

Mirei Nakamura was still absent. Toshihiko had known it was coming, but nonetheless, he sighed dejectedly upon glimpsing the attendance record. The girl probably wouldn't be coming to Matsuno Juku again anytime soon.

The day before the previous one, he'd paid a visit to the Nakamura household along with Sayama. They'd called ahead to let Mirei's mother know they were coming, but she'd remained pretty cold toward them. At first, she tried to hold their entire conversation over

the intercom, hoping they would leave after that. After Sayama refused to back down, Mirei's mother opened the door for them with a deliberately exaggerated sigh. Just like Hirona had said, the front gate was adorned with aggressive-looking anticlimb spikes.

"I've told you before that my daughter isn't feeling well. I don't see why—"

Dr. Nakamura's attitude had been pretty spiky, too, but she stopped short when she saw Toshihiko. For a moment, she froze, just staring at his face. A lot of people had a similar reaction upon meeting him for the first time. But she quickly recovered her professional demeanor, glaring at the two of them and picking up where she left off.

"I don't see why I should tell you anything more. Isn't it a little odd for two cram school teachers to be paying a home visit to check up on one student? I'm rather busy. I'll see to it that Mirei keeps attending. Isn't that enough for you?"

"As I explained on the telephone, Mr. Katayama here has some concerns…"

Sayama trailed off, wilting under the incredible pressure Mirei's mother exerted. Toshihiko saw that he would have to take over.

"I'm Toshihiko Katayama. You probably heard already, but Mirei was with me when I…"

"Oh, so you're Katayama. You smaller cram schools must have it hard if you need star attractions to entice new students."

Ignoring her gibe at him, he went on.

"Would it be possible for us to speak to Mirei?"

"What is there to talk about? Are you going to reassure her you'll still be there to get her to keep on attending? I told you already, I'll take care of that. You needn't worry about cheering her up in the meantime."

"That's not it. Well, not entirely. But if she stays away much longer, it'll just waste your money, so if you would like, we can extend her leave of absence indefinitely."

"We're not exactly strapped for cash, Mr. Katayama."

Toshihiko's suggestion only seemed to inflame the lady further.

"Why was she even with you that day? I didn't want to say anything since you got hurt so badly, but there's something strange about the whole thing. Don't tell me you're going to say *you* have a relationship with her, too? It's disgusting! Mirei's just a child!"

That "too" reminded Toshihiko of what Mirei had said about her home tutor. The memory made him queasy. But Mirei's mother didn't even give him time to deny it.

"My older children will be home soon, so I really can't have you staying here any longer. Please leave. And don't concern yourself with our family's problems again."

She refused to listen to anything more they had to say, and they were forced to go without ever seeing Mirei. According to Sayama, the girl's family seemed to place more importance on the fact that she was enrolled at a cram school at all than on whether it was improving her grades.

"But her mom has it tough, too. They seem to be the type of family where everything about the kids' lives gets left to the mother. Nakamura's brothers are apparently hardworking, diligent students, so they're probably fine. Nakamura herself, not so much. She always seemed like she was under a lot of pressure to me. Like she enrolled at Matsuno Juku just to get her parents off her back," said Sayama.

"Wait, their mom has to do everything?! Isn't she also working full-time as a doctor?"

Sayama laughed ruefully.

"Not all men are as enlightened as you—let's put it that way."

Toshihiko had lost his father in high school. His father had also been a doctor, a heart surgeon at a university hospital. He'd always been busy and had never come home at a consistent time. They may not have had the routine other "normal" families did, but Toshihiko still had plenty of memories of his father. Toshihiko had never gotten into any serious trouble that his parents knew about, but if he had, the blame wouldn't have been put on his mother alone.

"I guess it takes all kinds to make a world."

He decided to shut down any further attempts to discuss this issue. There was no point speculating about something so thoroughly divorced from his own experience.

After that, the two of them met up with Midori and went to a restaurant to update her on the situation. She seemed pretty clued in on Mirei's family situation already, though. She didn't actually say, *I told you it was pointless going to talk to them*, but it was clear that was what she was thinking.

It was a pity they hadn't been able to get anything out of Mirei that day. Toshihiko had been hoping she would at least tell him if the woman who had attacked her was the same tall woman Hirona had seen during her visit.

Mirei used to come to the cram school even when she didn't have any classes, making up some excuse or other to see Toshihiko. For someone like that to refuse so stubbornly to speak to Toshihiko spoke volumes about the condition she was in. Right now, getting her side of the story wasn't going to be an option. It was time to pursue other avenues.

"Mr. Katayama?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder and almost jumped out of his skin. It was Midori.

"That was a bit of an overreaction, don't you think?"

Midori laughed, her voice clear and bell-like. It was the kind of sweet, innocent laugh that contrasted with her mature, dignified appearance. There were probably plenty of men out there who would find this side of her absolutely adorable. And yet Toshihiko still hadn't cleared her of suspicion. Her childlike smile, which had seemed pleasant enough before, now took on a more sinister air.

"Sorry, I guess I was spacing out."

"Really? Still worried about Nakamura?"

She gave him a sharp look and pointed at his computer screen.

"Being concerned is one thing, but aren't you taking it a little too far? Her family has a right to deal with the situation in their own

way, and there's really nothing more you can do. Don't tell me you and her seriously are—"

"Hey, now who's jumping to conclusions?" Sayama butted in, jumping to Toshihiko's defense. "Dr. Nakamura accused him of the same thing, you know. Mr. Katayama seemed pretty hurt by it. Really, it's sad the way people latch on to these ideas just because the two parties involved are male and female."

Midori's face stiffened. Her lip trembled briefly, but then she turned back to Toshihiko with a steadier expression.

"I'm sorry. I just meant to say that it would be easy for people to assume things like that. I don't want you getting into trouble."

"No, it's fine. I appreciate you looking out for me."

Toshihiko went with a very by-the-book response. Midori apologized a couple more times before returning to her own desk. She seemed strangely persistent about it, which only made the possible connection between Midori and the letters stronger in Toshihiko's mind.

"Such a hassle, am I right?" Sayama mumbled. "We're talking about a middle school girl. There's no way you'd have feelings for her either way. You're just worried like any responsible adult would be, but because you're a man and she's a girl, people get these weird ideas."

Toshihiko's motives weren't quite as noble as Sayama seemed to think, of course. He nodded vaguely, feeling a little guilty that the other teacher was working so hard to cheer him up.

"If I'm being honest, though, I agree that you seem a little too fixated. I don't think romance comes into it, but there's so much about this incident that still doesn't make sense. It almost seems like what you really want is to question Nakamura about it."

Toshihiko hesitated. Midori being the one behind the letters was still nothing but a personal theory; he wasn't about to share it unless he was sure. If he told Sayama why he was so concerned about Mirei, he'd have to tell him what he knew about the stalker, too. And given how not just Mirei but every woman at the cram school was a

potential suspect, he couldn't go letting that particular cat out of the bag just yet.

On the other hand, looking at Sayama's kind, considerate face, he couldn't help but feel some of that paranoia and suspicion ease up. It was obvious why everybody seemed to like this guy. Sayama was the archetypal "normal" person whom Toshihiko had always aspired to be like. "What you see is what you get" seemed the perfect way to sum him up. For better or worse, people always ended up overanalyzing the things Toshihiko said and did.

"Life would be so much easier if I could be like you…"

The moment he uttered the words, he realized how jealous and petty they sounded. Sayama didn't seem to hear him, however, and Toshihiko wasn't about to repeat himself.

"I dropped something when I fell that day. It's kind of important to me, so I wanted to check if Nakamura knew what happened to it, that's all."

He flashed Sayama a wry smile, then asked him to keep it off-the-record, since him *not* being worried about Mirei might look just as suspicious. The other man sighed.

"I'm sorry if I touched a nerve back there. When you smile like that, though, I can see why people fall over themselves trying to please you sometimes."

"You didn't touch a nerve. It's all good."

He was being sincere. When Sayama said that kind of stuff, none of it had sounded like criticism. It was more like he was paying Toshihiko a genuine, heartfelt compliment. In a weird way, talking to him dispelled the gloom that dealing with Midori had brought up. Just one more reason to be envious of the man's interpersonal skills.

The next day, Toshihiko took a trip to Nihonbashi. He was going to see Miyoshi, an old college friend. More of an acquaintance, really. They'd been in different school years and hadn't spoken much back in the day. But some time after graduation, they'd run into each

other at a screening of a minor horror film and bonded over that. Miyoshi was a researcher studying molecular biology. After Toshihiko got in touch with him to ask for his advice, Miyoshi suggested they meet at his lab.

Thinking about the *thing* he'd brought with him made Toshihiko want to throw up. He'd put it in a paper bag that he was keeping closed tight, but it didn't make him feel any better. Inside the bag was the menstrual pad, the dried blood still clinging to it. The same one that had fallen off his door and gotten stuck to his shoe.

Sweat beaded on his face, making his mask cling to his skin. Given the kind of attention he attracted, riding the train could be risky business, so Toshihiko always wore a face mask for safety. At least when he was out on the street, he had somewhere to run if any trouble started. It might have made him come across as a little paranoid, but that was a small price to pay for his peace of mind.

The domino effect that Toshihiko's face caused on a train had to be seen to be believed. He'd had to start wearing the mask when he was in middle school. These days, he rarely left home without it—a fact that he definitely resented on some level.

The sensation of the mask sticking to his face inevitably made him think of how the menstrual pad had stuck to his door. He thought about taking his mask off, but even with only his eyes on show, his appearance was already exerting its usual influence. He could feel stares on him. Not just from one person—there were several purposeful gazes resting on him. It wasn't the same clingy gaze of the woman who had sent the letters, but it was still disturbing nonetheless. He decided to switch trains before things had a chance to escalate.

Still feeling gloomy, he finally arrived at his destination. It was a large building reminiscent of a department store. The lower levels actually did house retail outlets. This was where Miyoshi worked. Toshihiko gave his name at the reception area and received a

lanyard and visitor ID from the security guard. He took the elevator to the tenth floor. He hadn't called ahead to say he'd arrived, but Miyoshi was there waiting for him.

"Hi. It's been a while," Miyoshi said, waving.

"Sure has. Thanks for agreeing to see me today."

While Toshihiko was a good five feet, eight inches—not short by any means—Miyoshi was much taller. Toshihiko had to look up when he was talking to him. He could already feel his neck aching. Miyoshi claimed he only went to the gym three times a week, but he was surprisingly muscular. Not the kind of person who came to mind when you heard the word *researcher*. In contrast to his physique, he had a fresh, baby-faced look that made him resemble a rookie athlete.

Miyoshi narrowed his eyes in a friendly smile and waved Toshihiko inside. This floor of the building covered a surprising amount of space. Unlike a regular office, it was split off into several smaller rooms, like classrooms at a university. Miyoshi pointed out one of them as his lab. There was even a plate on the door with his name on it. Toshihiko made an offhand comment about him being king of the castle and followed him in.

The entrance was narrow, but the lab stretched on some distance and had another door at the back. The room they were in now was stacked with all kinds of books and documents, so the one at the back was probably where the actual experiments were conducted. Miyoshi put both arms across the top of a desk and slowly pushed off the contents, like a human windshield wiper. Everything fell to the floor in a heap.

"I've found this is the best way to clean up."

It was a pretty rough way to treat research materials. Before he could comment, Toshihiko realized that Miyoshi's "cleaning up" had revealed a computer on the desk. Miyoshi picked up a remote control from the floor, and at the push of a button, a large monitor rose up at the front end of the lab.

"You're really cutting-edge here, huh?"

Miyoshi gave a modest shrug.

"Are you familiar with face morphing?"

Toshihiko nodded. If memory served, it was some app from overseas that allowed you to combine the characteristics of two different people's photos to create a hypothetical fusion. It even worked with cats and dogs. For a while, posting merged photos had been all the rage on social media.

"We started with that as a base and expanded on it to create full-on 3D models."

At some point, Miyoshi had brought up a photo of Toshihiko in his college days, along with another of himself. He clicked a button labeled START, and in a flash, a 3D model of a brand-new man appeared.

"Whoa!"

Upon closer inspection, the model looked mostly like Toshihiko, except maybe with Miyoshi's cowlick and messy hairstyle. The man on the screen smiled brightly. Toshihiko let out a yelp. It was uncanny—like seeing his own reflection come to life.

"I guess when it's dealing with someone as attractive as you, the program doesn't bother incorporating elements from the other person. That's new. Might be a little taller, though. People tend to perceive things as 'beautiful' the closer they get to the average. Normally, it's more of a fifty-fifty mix."

Toshihiko knew that if he let him, Miyoshi would ramble on forever without getting to the point. He'd have to butt in to keep the man on track.

"It's really well-done."

"In this case, we're just converting photos into 3D and moving them around a little. That's not the real goal. There's plenty of artsy types who could achieve the same thing with enough effort. But I'm a biologist, and I'm hoping to use this as the basis for something completely new."

He made some changes on the screen.

"Do you know about SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphism?"

“Not in the same way you experts do.”

Toshihiko knew only a little about the concept. He might not even have that much right, but it was something to do with the genetic information that decided individual characteristics. The nucleotide sequence that carried genetic information was about 99 percent the same in all humans. What remained accounted for the many ways people differed in terms of appearance, ability, and so on.

Some organization had identified this quality and, in reference to that key 1 percent, had dubbed it the *single*-nucleotide. Apparently, irregularities in that 1 percent of the sequence were also what caused various genetic disorders.

Miyoshi began to give a more detailed explanation, but Toshihiko’s attention soon drifted. Top players and top coaches were not created equal. Miyoshi seemed to notice his change in expression and cut the lecture short.

“Basically, if we can analyze the DNA from even a single hair, we can reconstruct the sequence to figure out what that person looks like.”

“I’ve heard about that kind of technology. I thought it hadn’t been perfected yet?”

SNP analysis could turn up characteristics like “having a lot of body hair,” “being susceptible to heart disease,” or “having blue eyes,” but in the end, it was only provided probabilities, not absolute answers. World experts on genetics said that several factors contributed to a person’s characteristics, so it wasn’t yet possible to assemble an accurate picture of an individual from just a strand of hair.

In China, there had been attempts to use discarded cigarette butts or chewed gum to re-create surprisingly accurate images of criminals to put up as wanted posters. But those “surprisingly accurate” images hadn’t actually led to any arrests. When Toshihiko mentioned this to Miyoshi, the other man stroked his chin proudly. He proceeded to type in some commands, displaying a new 3D model on the screen.

Toshihiko couldn't conceal his surprise. It was Zimbalist, a man who had been arrested in Montana two weeks ago for a series of slasher incidents. He'd caused outrage by exclusively targeting old people and was estimated to have over a hundred victims. His rampage had gotten a lot of media attention even in Japan.

Zimbalist's MO of repeated stabbings with a sharp, awl-like weapon was nothing new. It was the fact that he'd been able to get away with attacking so many people in the space of just three months that was remarkable. American websites had started calling him "The Invisible Killer." It turned out the real reason he'd escaped capture so long was because he'd previously worked for the state traffic commission. He knew the locations of surveillance cameras around the state and how best to avoid them. Why was Miyoshi showing Toshihiko this?

"Did you—"

Before Toshihiko could ask if the model had been based on photos in the news, his friend cut him off.

"Nope, this was all reconstructed from one of his hairs. They requested my process specifically, so I figured it was time to give it a try. As you can see, the results speak for themselves. They were even able to arrest him."

"This is… Well, it's perfect…"

Miyoshi wouldn't lie about something like this. He really had developed a revolutionary new system. Ever since their college days, Toshihiko had always known this man was a genius. They'd been in a pretty elite environment to begin with, but Miyoshi still stood out from the crowd. He hadn't even finished school yet when he had his first article published in *Cell*, a renowned academic journal dealing with life sciences. He'd also gone on a government-funded research trip visiting different facilities around the world.

There was no room to suspect these results as anything other than genuine. Even so, Toshihiko found it all a little overwhelming. Technology of this level felt as if it was bordering on supernatural. However, he'd come to Miyoshi for this exact kind of scientific

expertise in the first place. His friend clearly had connections with law enforcement now—maybe he could reference the data of past offenders or at least tell Toshihiko the culprit's age or gender. This went so far beyond his expectations.

A common theme in sci-fi stories and anti-science Christian rhetoric was the idea of a "Genetic Surveillance Society." This was a society in which genetics were so well understood that future generations could be tailor-made to exact specifications. From there, it was a slippery slope until genetically-enhanced "Valids" would emerge to rule over all aspects of society.

Toshihiko had always thought of such a scenario as pure fiction. But looking at the image on the screen again, he began to wonder if it might actually come to pass in the not so distant future.

Miyoshi had been looking at Toshihiko the whole time like a child showing off a new toy. Finally, he spoke up again.

"Just to be clear, I need you to keep this strictly between us. It's still in the experimental phase. I know you're not the type to go blabbing to people, but this is a highly classified project. It's important the media doesn't get wind of it. It's almost perfect already, but we're still working out some kinks, you know?"

The model of Zimbalist smiled. It was the same creepy smile he'd shown on the news when he was taken in. What part of this was only "almost" perfect?

"I think I've showed off enough for one day. Let's see what we can do about your problem."

"Thanks."

How did Miyoshi maintain that sweet and innocent nature despite such amazing achievements? Toshihiko was a little awestruck. He took out a zip-sealed plastic bag from the paper bag he was carrying. Inside it was the telltale menstrual pad.

"You did warn me about it, but it's still pretty creepy."

Miyoshi's expression didn't change in the slightest. He used a pair of tweezers to remove the pad, filling the air with that distinctive metallic bloody smell. There was also a rotting odor that penetrated

right through Toshihiko's mask and made him want to hurl. If Miyoshi was affected, he didn't let it show on his face.

"Hmm… With a sample this old, it could be difficult," he said, putting it into a plastic bag of his own.

"I'm sorry. You're the only one I can trust with this."

"No need to apologize. I'll see what I can do. But I'm going to need time. Like I said, this'll be difficult, and no offense, but I have a lot on my plate already. I'll need to prioritize other stuff."

"Now who's apologizing for no reason? I should be thanking you for letting me use this amazing technology."

"It's fine. I'm just happy you got back in touch after all this time. That's payment enough for me."

Miyoshi gave him a couple of light slaps on the shoulder. Toshihiko didn't really watch horror movies anymore or go to screenings. He never would have gotten back in touch with Miyoshi if their interests hadn't aligned that one time.

Although technically, it was Miyoshi who'd reached out to him. Two years Toshihiko's senior, he was an accomplished young academic with an athletic build, and there wasn't a student on campus who didn't know him by sight. Toshihiko was no exception, but he'd never expected such a superstar to talk to him. Even with his own incredible looks, he saw Miyoshi as someone outside the bounds of conventional beauty standards. Toshihiko felt like a pebble on the roadside next to him. When he'd told Miyoshi that after the movie, the man had laughed uproariously. He had a surprisingly low voice.

"I don't think there's a single person on this earth who wouldn't take notice of you, Katayama."

Before Toshihiko could think of an answer, Miyoshi had patted him on the shoulder and added, "Well, let's try to get along from here on, one outcast to another."

True to his word, Miyoshi had kept up contact. If there was some horror-related event going on, he would always invite Toshihiko to it. He'd even been able to pull some strings and get the two of them into places the general public weren't usually allowed.

Toshihiko hadn't really done anything in return. He sometimes ignored Miyoshi's messages for months at a time if he wasn't in the mood to talk. And yet here he was, asking to make use of Miyoshi's professional expertise out of the blue. He felt a surge of guilt and lowered his head in a formal bow.

"Sorry. I really am grateful for everything."

"I'm telling you, you're making too much of it."

After bowing several more times, Toshihiko left the lab. The moment he stepped out of the building, he felt it. A cold chill ran down his back. That gaze again, as clingy as menstrual blood on a menstrual pad. He spun around, but there was no one there. The gaze also disappeared. Toshihiko knew this feeling of being watched wasn't just his paranoia at work, but maybe this time, he had only been imagining it. He hadn't done much besides listen to Miyoshi ramble, but he felt exhausted. He decided to head home and go to bed early.

3

He seemed so gloomy today. I got rid of that little brat who's been hassling him, so what more can he possibly have to worry about? That girl is never going to bother him again; he must know that after going to her house. I did actually feel kind of sorry for her, having to live with a mother like that.

She's not his concern anymore. He should forget all about that pitiful child and focus on me. Even at lunch, the girl was all he would talk about. Could he… Could he really have feelings for her? No, it's impossible. That would be so wrong. A hopeless little brat who doesn't even have the love of her family has no right to his affections.

I'm mad now. So mad. I won't forgive her. No, never. Never, never, never. I was too soft. Taking her out of the picture isn't enough. I have to open his eyes to the truth. It's just like you said, Mommy. Men are drawn to youth. That's why women always have to seem young and cute…even if deep down, they're not.

Is…is that really what's happening here? Is he really that kind of man? I think about the way he usually is. He might be a little odd. And of course, he's unnaturally beautiful. Maybe he would act this way toward anyone? Unlike the other men at his work, he doesn't discriminate. He treats that fat pig Ootani the same way he does Kawahara, who's like a pop star. That's one of the things I love about him.

"Ha-ha-ha."

Mommy laughs at me.

"What?"

When she laughs like that, it means she's been drinking too much. It means she's in a nasty mood. I'm almost afraid to ask her what she's thinking.

"You are such a fool."

Mommy puts one leg on the table and leans back in her chair, making it creak.

"You're so stupid, so easily fooled. You never learn. You can't seriously believe all this, can you?"

There's a crisp clatter. Her glass is empty now, leaving only a ball of ice. I pour her more liquor, filling the glass to the brim, hoping she'll go to sleep soon. But no, she drains the glass dry and laughs loudly again.

"Since you're so stupid, I have no choice but to teach you. You're not young or cute anymore. But the real problem is something that goes far beyond that."

Shut up. Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up! Don't you think I know that already?

"You know what I mean, don't you?"

Shut up.

I knock over the bottle of liquor. It doesn't break. Mommy sees it and snorts derisively. She gets to her feet and puts an arm around my shoulder. My body goes stiff. But it's not what I'm expecting. Mommy draws me into a hug and speaks to me gently, even kindly.

"You just have to do what I tell you."

Her thin, bony fingers stroke my head, stopping me from escaping.

"I'll always be on your side, ■■■■."

Yes. Of course. I'm ■■■■. Mommy's Little ■■■■. Mommy is never wrong.

Mommy hugs me tighter. I slump down onto the bed. I just have to make him understand. He needs to, if he's going to love me. In a way, he's just like any other man—it's no use trying to be subtle with him. I need to make things nice and clear if I really want him to understand. And when he does, he'll finally come home.

I need to make him understand.

But that can wait. I'll start tomorrow. Right now, my head feels too fuzzy to think about it. And I'm sleepy. So…so sleepy…

4

The next morning, Toshihiko noticed that Kawahara was deliberately ignoring him. Even after they'd broken up, she'd continued to cast suggestive glances at him or leave hint-laden notes on his desk. Now all that had suddenly stopped.

Come to think of it, she'd started angling for sympathy a week or so back, claiming she hadn't been feeling well lately. And she did look gloomy, like she wasn't getting enough sleep or something. Perhaps it hadn't been an act after all. Toshihiko took a good look at her; the woman's face was pallid, and her back was hunched slightly, as if her core had been taken out of her and she no longer had the energy to stand up straight.

Toshihiko placed a bottle of vitamins on Kawahara's desk. If anyone caught him doing this, they would probably have gotten the mistaken impression he still had feelings for her. The truth was that he knew she had a strong constitution (in more ways than one) and was worried about what could be affecting her so badly. Had she always been as healthy and stable as she appeared?

She didn't realize he was the one who'd left the vitamins. Even if she did, she didn't say anything to him about it. There was no danger of complications there. He really wanted to avoid any

misunderstandings. If it was any other coworker, he could have shrugged things off, but Kawahara had several admirers among the cram school staff. It would be all too easy for them to believe he was one, too.

Takuro Matsuno, the son of the school's director, was one such suitor. He was always hovering around her, calling her affectionate nicknames and treating her better than he did the other women in the office. He'd invite her to dinner while everyone was watching; Toshihiko had seen him do it several times. Everyone considered him a rather hopeless case, not least Kawahara herself. She generally responded to his advances with icy looks.

Now that she and Toshihiko had broken up, he didn't want to do anything that might give people mixed messages. It was a sad reality that perfectly innocent actions could be interpreted in unexpected and unintended ways. Toshihiko probably knew that better than anyone. It was strange she was avoiding him—she was even taking long detours to avoid running into him—but there was no point fretting about this. The problem would probably sort itself out, given time.

"You there. Kawahara," came an irritatingly high voice.

It was Ootani, another member of the admin staff. A rather rotund lady, she could probably be mistaken for a small mountain from a distance. She had an ugly face, too. Maybe Toshihiko wouldn't have thought of her so harshly if she was really good at her job or had a great personality, but in his estimation, neither were the case.

Ootani was the type who always read too deeply into things and immediately caused a fuss about it. She often complained about how women were oppressed but ignored the fact that she was the one doing a lot of the oppressing. "That's not the way we do things here!" was a favorite phrase of hers. If you heard it coming from inside the break room, you knew she was telling someone off.

Even Midori had been on the receiving end of Ootani's attacks. So had two students who'd been chatting in the hallway—a couple, apparently. Ootani had pulled them apart with a "That's not the way

we do things here!" and subsequently banned any and all PDA among the students.

Being the daughter of the cram school director's old friend, Ootani was quite the big fish. It was such an injustice that people like her and Takuro, people who had nothing but a negative effect on the work environment, never got fired. At least this was still the kind of place where an outcast like Toshihiko could get by fairly comfortably. He was grateful for that much.

Right now, Ootani was standing in front of Kawahara, blocking her path.

"What is it, Ms. Ootani? I'd like to get past…"

Kawahara's tone was harsher than usual. Normally, even when Ootani started throwing her weight around, Kawahara managed to rise above it and avoid provoking her any further. Out of everyone in the office, she was probably the one Ootani was the least confrontational with.

"I don't like your tone. Are you saying I'm taking up too much space? Making personal remarks about a person's body type is one of the rudest things you can possibly do, you know."

The office heaved a collective sigh of resigned exasperation. *Here we go again*, it seemed to say. Takuro Matsuno pretended to be deeply absorbed in the paperwork on his desk. As much as he seemed to like Kawahara, he didn't have it in him to defend her honor in a situation like this. It was pathetic, really.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. What do you want? If you've got some business with me, come right out and say it."

Not to be outdone by the fearsome look in Kawahara's eyes, Ootani glared right back at her. The younger woman never spoke to or looked at anyone like this. Ootani became more and more hysterical as she went on.

"Our job involves safeguarding children, you know. We have a duty to set an example for these impressionable young minds. You can't expect to shrug everything off with a simple 'That's not what I meant.'"

Noticing that Kawahara wasn't buckling under her verbal assault, Ootani changed tack.

"At any rate, I hear that you've been harassing Mr. Katayama."

Toshihiko barely stifled a cry of incredulity. That Ootani had been perceptive enough to notice Kawahara was avoiding him was one thing. But to label it as a form of harassment felt excessive. Her behavior was passive-aggressive, perhaps. But they were all adults here. No one with an ounce of discretion would have felt the need to call someone out on it.

"I've been watching the whole thing. We're all adults here. Even if you don't get along with someone, the *normal* thing to do is to just bear with it. Try to consider Mr. Katayama's feelings. And another thing! I'll thank you to remember that this is a workplace—you're here to work. It's not somewhere for you to find a man. That's not the way we do things here!"

A self-satisfied smirk rose to Ootani's lips. She'd said all she wanted to say. She cast a meaningful look at Toshihiko, as if to tell him, *There, I've fixed that problem for you*. He felt like he should say something to make his position on all this clear and was just opening his mouth to do so, when…

"Shut up."

For a moment, nobody was sure who had spoken; the voice had been so low. Everyone who usually made a point of busying themselves with other conversations when Ootani was on the warpath fell silent. Kawahara slowly raised her head.

"Let me ask *you* something. Do you know why you're so unsatisfied with your life, Ms. Ootani?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Kawahara's sudden change in demeanor had clearly shaken her.

"What do you mean, 'what are you talking about'? Day after day after day, all you do is complain and snap at people. What the hell is your problem?"

Kawahara held her head in frustration, running her fingers back and forth. Her hair clip came undone, making her chestnut-brown

locks fly out in every direction. Ignoring the strands that had gone into her mouth, she rounded on the older woman.

"You're always talking about discrimination and oppression," she hissed, her voice cracking, "but have you ever even looked in the mirror?"

Ootani's face had gone white with shock, but now an angry blush was spreading across it.

"Ms. Kawahara, you mustn't say any more than this."

"What more *can* I say? I can only assume that you've never looked in the mirror. Otherwise, you'd realize just what a shameful existence you're living."

Kawahara opened her mouth wide and laughed. Tears were streaming down her face. Swaying on her feet, she started to prowl around Ootani.

"I guess it falls to me to tell you. The reason you're so unhappy is because you're *fat* and *stupid*. That's why nobody in your life cares about you. It's only natural you'd start to feel bad, living like that. But in the end, it's your own fault. Discrimination? Don't make me laugh. Nobody likes you, that's all. And oppression? Ha! You oppress those around you just by existing. You can't keep blaming it on the rest of the world. Even pigs like you need to take *some* responsibility for themselves. Do you seriously think that if you flirt with enough men, you'll somehow make it into high society? It's pathetic. You really are stupid. Everyone, old and young, male and female—they're all just *putting up with you*. It's nothing to do with society, you idiot! People like you, strutting around like you're someone important—that's what's really wrong with the world. Drop dead, you ugly pig!"

With one last shriek, Kawahara fell silent. She staggered in place, her eyes still fixed on Ootani. She was foaming at the mouth, laughing wordlessly, as if she was possessed. Ootani was clearly terrified. And she wasn't the only one. Everyone was frozen in fear, trying to process what had happened to Kawahara.

Everyone except Toshihiko. He alone stepped forward to approach her. Ootani deserved this; that much was true. Kawahara's outburst

was less cheap abuse and more hard-hitting truths. But even someone as unpleasant as Ootani would look like a victim when given such a thorough dressing down. This wasn't just Ootani's fault, either. Everyone in the office shared some responsibility for letting things get to this point.

How long had Kawahara been holding all this in? Despite the side of herself she'd shown when she and Toshihiko were dating, she'd always kept up a strong outward front, always seeming so much kinder than everyone else. Granted, that kindness went hand in hand with her calculating nature, but even surface-level kindness for the sake of appearances took effort. As someone who had to work hard on his own public persona, Toshihiko still admired her.

Something must have happened to make her finally fly off the handle. And Toshihiko had a feeling that "something" was him. He reached out to put a hand on Kawahara's shoulder and calm her down. She spun around to face him. A gasp of surprise escaped his lips. Her head was lolling to one side as if her neck had gone completely limp. She scampered up close to him until their faces were almost touching.

"T-Toshihiko."

Her eyes went wide.

"Toshihiko! I'm sorry, I was just so in love with you! You were so nice, and so handsome, handsome, handsome… You did nothing wrong! Nothing, nothing, nothing… B-But the thing is, I… I…"

There was a gushing sound, and something brown splattered the floor.

"She's throwing up!" Ootani shrieked.

Kawahara tried to step back, but her legs stayed in place, and she pitched forward instead. She clung onto Toshihiko's knees, vomit still dribbling down her chin.

"I can see now I shouldn't have been so clingy."

She pitched to one side next and fell like a puppet with its strings cut. She splashed into the puddle of vomit, the dirty liquid spattering over Toshihiko's slacks. But none of that mattered in that moment.

"Somebody call an ambulance!"

Sayama was the first to take affirmative action. His voice seemed to break the spell over the office, and everyone started talking at once. Some people went running out of the room, while a few curious students pushed their way in from the corridor to see what was going on.

"I didn't do anything!" Ootani wailed—not that anybody was listening to her.

Everyone was gawking at Kawahara, collapsed on the floor and covered in her own vomit, and at Toshihiko, who was just standing next to her in a daze. He didn't move from that spot until the paramedics arrived with a stretcher.

It would be more accurate to say he couldn't move. He'd been too absorbed in thinking about the last thing Kawahara had said before she collapsed. "I shouldn't have been so clingy." *Clingy*. He couldn't help drawing a connection between that word and his current stalker problems. Kawahara couldn't have known about that, could she? Not unless someone close to him like Midori or Sayama had told her.

Toshihiko slipped away from the chaos, asking everyone to give him a minute to himself, and went to the bathroom. After he had a chance to cool off, he realized he was falling into the same trap Hirona had. He was allowing his emotions to interfere with his judgment, making connections where there might not be any. There was no evidence that his stalker and Kawahara's outburst had anything to do with each other. It was far more rational to assume they were unrelated.

Thinking about the whole thing logically, the most likely explanation was that Kawahara herself was the stalker. She would obviously know about her own criminal activities, and her statement had been an admission of guilt, a way to get it all off her chest.

Even so, Toshihiko found it hard to deny the possibility there was some kind of nonhuman agent at work. He'd used the word *clingy* to describe the mysterious gaze he felt on him so often; could it be that *he* was being possessed by something?

He thought of the noise the security cameras had picked up of two hard surfaces rubbing against each other. He thought of the tall woman and the unnatural grinding sound Hirona had encountered. He had also heard the grinding during his visit to Mirei's house. It didn't seem like Sayama or Mirei's mother could hear it, though. The letters and the menstrual pad were tangible, physical pieces of evidence. He'd thought that meant the culprit behind all this was a physical, living person. Had he been wrong?

He felt foolish for having been so determined to start with a scientific approach. He should have taken *all* the possibilities into account. *Who cares about being realistic?* he berated himself inside his head. *You know there are things in this world that are beyond the understanding of science. You've experienced them for yourself!* He also knew that those were the kind of things that would quickly get out of hand if left alone too long.

Toshihiko took out his phone and dialed a number. In a situation like this, there was only one person he could call.



Chapter 3: Look Away

1

"Hey there, it's been a while."

A little way off the main business district of Iidabashi was a general-use office building. On the third floor were the headquarters of the Sasaki Agency. The agency head, Rumi Sasaki, greeted Toshihiko with a donut in one hand and crumbs scattered around her mouth.

"It's not been that long, has it?"

"Oh, but it has. It's been six months since the last time I saw you."

"Huh. I guess you're right."

"Time flies when you're an adult, huh?"

She beckoned Toshihiko to the sofa and offered him a choice of tea or coffee.

Rumi Sasaki was someone he'd known since his high school days, some fifteen years ago. When they first met, her age and gender had been pretty ambiguous. If you looked at her closely, her small nose and mouth were feminine enough. Her skin was in good

condition, too, but her shabby gray sweater and her hair, which was as messy as a bird's nest, along with her outdated, thick glasses, had made it hard for him be sure of anything.

Things were a little better now. She looked like a woman who didn't care too much about grooming or presentation, but a woman nonetheless. She still wore the sweater, a little threadbare around the neck, though it didn't appear as unhygienic these days. She'd also traded her glasses in for a pair with a modern plastic frame and thinner lenses. Her hair was tied up in the back, making it look less messy. Toshihiko suspected this was all due to the influence of her assistant, Kouki Aoyama. He was happy for her.

Toshihiko had met Rumi through their mutual interest in the paranormal. She ran a website that looked at contemporary incidents in the news through an occult lens. There was also a message board where readers could discuss their interests. After Toshihiko made a few posts there, the two of them had eventually met up in person.

Back then, Rumi had been a lot more unkempt. She spoke like a teenager posting on an online forum and lacked awareness of more common courtesies. Toshihiko had always considered himself someone who didn't care what other people thought of him, but Rumi took that to a whole new level.

Regardless of her appearance and attitude, she'd helped him on a number of occasions. She might have only been acting out of curiosity, but the result was the same. She'd lent her aid when Toshihiko's childhood friend Eiko got caught up in an incident, and she had also saved his life at least once. They'd worked together on several cases, and he knew that her problem-solving skills were second to none.

Rumi could not only see supernatural presences but also exorcise them. Toshihiko had some measure of enhanced perception, but he couldn't do anything about the things he saw. The occult was something that he indulged in as a hobby, for fun. He didn't study it seriously like she did.

When it came to paranormal issues, she was the only person he could turn to for help. She had a record of past successes and more than enough time on her hands. After all, when encountering the supernatural, most people—if they even accepted the supernatural was at work—would go to a shrine, temple, or church, not a shady agency like this. Plus, due to a number of grudges they'd incurred, the agency's reputation had been stained with a lot of slander and abuse.

Many of the bad rumors were completely unfounded, but others were likely based on actual encounters with Rumi. Knowing her, she probably turned away any clients who didn't sufficiently pique her interest. Their lack of work seemed so pronounced that Toshihiko had once asked Aoyama if they needed any help covering their operating costs.

"Thanks, but we're fine," Aoyama had said with a mild smile. "Rumi has followers of her own."

Being the son of a Protestant minister, that was probably Aoyama's way of making a joke. Toshihiko assumed he meant Rumi had genuinely helped enough people that they could keep the agency afloat despite her faults.

Unsurprisingly, nobody else was in the office today. Even Rumi's assistant, who usually stuck by her side like a puppy, wasn't there.

"Hey, where's Aoyama?"

"He's been busy helping out his family a lot more recently."

Toshihiko nodded and took a sip of his coffee. It was dreadfully bitter and didn't even compare to the kind Aoyama usually served. Rumi ignored the way Toshihiko winced when he tasted it and continued chomping through her donut. She was a weird lady, but that meant Toshihiko could be himself around her. He was actually quite fond of her. She may have lacked more traditional feminine charms, but she was cute like a hamster with its cheeks stuffed full of food.

"So, are you possessed by another demon, or what?"

Rumi pointed at Toshihiko, her mouth still full of half-eaten donut.

"You should probably be used to that by now."

Although her words were more or less the same as what that rude detective Kamemura had said to him, it didn't sound so bad coming from her.

"This isn't the kind of thing you get used to, no matter how many times it happens. I'm not completely sure I'm possessed yet, either."

This wasn't the first time a supernatural presence had attached itself to Toshihiko or attacked him. Whenever he worked with Rumi, whatever evil spirit they were dealing with always seemed to target him. According to her, evil was drawn to beauty, and if that was true, it was only natural that he would attract their attention.

"You don't say." Rumi drained her glass of water in one gulp. "Now that you mention it, I don't see any spirits on or around you right now."

"Really?"

Rumi's power to see the unseen was stronger than Toshihiko's. If she couldn't spot anything, then maybe he wasn't possessed after all. Had it just been a coincidence that Kawahara's choice of words had been so evocative of the stalker's gaze?

"You do have a mark on you, though. Looks like it's clinging on real tight."

He reflexively looked up and stared into Rumi's eyes. *Clinging on tight.* It was like she'd read his mind. His pulse quickened.

"If you keep staring at me like that, even I might get the wrong idea," Rumi said.

"Oh, sorry…"

"You must have it hard. Someone as beautiful as you probably attracts just as many unwanted looks as messy folks like me at the other end of the spectrum."

Rumi's expression stayed neutral, so he had no idea if she was serious or not. While he was searching for an appropriate reply, she spoke up again.

"Your current state is what laymen refer to as being cursed."

Without waiting for permission, she upended the paper bag he'd brought with him. The letters inside all came tumbling out.

"Hmm… You don't see power like this very often these days. We must be dealing with quite the accomplished hexer here."

She grabbed one of the letters and tore it into pieces. Before Toshihiko could ask what she was doing, she cried out in pain.

"Yowch!"

"Are you okay?"

Rumi's hand was dripping with blood. There was nothing on the table but scraps of paper. It didn't look like a blade had been hidden in the letter.

"Sorry for being so loud—I was just surprised. Nothing to worry about. You've been saddled with something real rough, though, Mr. Katayama. It's like it won't forgive anyone who dares to have anything to do with you."

She carefully wrapped her bleeding hand in a towel.

"Is it from somebody with a grudge against me?"

"I can't say for sure. There's no real point speculating without more information."

Rumi had a faraway look in her eyes.

"Maybe this person dislikes you and is harassing you. Or maybe they like you a little too much and this is the form their affection is taking. The result is still the same, and harassment is harassment. You have been wronged, Mr. Katayama. Regardless of the perpetrator's intent, we still have to treat this as an attack."

She swept her uninjured hand across her lap, scattering donut crumbs onto the floor. When did she start calling him "Mr. Katayama"? he wondered. For as long as he could remember, he'd been "Sir Toshihiko" to her. He felt a little sad to think he might have outgrown that mode of address.

"If the culprit is an evil spirit, there'd be value in determining their motives. But this is a curse cast by a human…"

Rumi glared at the remaining letters.

"A woman… In her thirties… Long black hair. Slim and rather tall."

An image of Midori flashed into Toshihiko's mind. She had all the characteristics Rumi had just described.

"Does that ring any bells?"

"Yeah…"

Toshihiko nodded. Rumi smiled.

"And she has a child. Could it be yours?"

"What? No."

Toshihiko responded with flat denial. Had Rumi got it wrong? Feeling something like relief, he went on.

"I've never been in that kind of relationship with her."

That was the truth. Midori had been pretty persistent about going out to dinner with him for a while, and he'd eventually agreed. He had no real reason to refuse, after all. Toshihiko didn't drink alcohol. He didn't see any point in purposely dulling his wits to have a good time. This policy did have some perks. People tended to be less careful about what they said or did while drunk, and being able to rebuff them with a totally clear head carried more weight.

At any rate, Toshihiko had no romantic feelings for Midori, so nothing ever happened between them. Sayama had said that it might be kinder to reject her outright, but it wasn't like she'd asked him out *on a date*. It would have been weird to start talking romance out of the blue. In the end, the whole thing had just fizzled out.

"The person I'm thinking of is single and doesn't have any kids. She lives with her mom in a little apartment. I can't imagine there'd be room to raise a kid there, too."

"I know you wouldn't lie to me…but that's what I'm seeing. A woman holding a little boy."

While Toshihiko wondered if this could be a mistake, Rumi continued to gaze at the letters.

"Well, that doesn't matter right now. If you've been cursed, there's only one thing to do."

"And that is?"

"Curse reversal."

"Excuse me?"

He'd forgotten about her habit of bringing up specialist terms in the course of everyday conversation. But that was just the kind of person Rumi was. It had been a while since he'd last interacted with her, so it would take some getting used to. But he would simply have to accept it—he'd come to an unconventional person for help with an unconventional problem, after all.

"Let's take the most common method of cursing someone in Japan as an example—the straw doll. You fashion a doll out of straw to represent your victim and drive an iron nail into it. Officially, the ritual is called *Ushi No Koku Mairi*—literally 'ox-hour shrine visit'—and it has rather detailed instructions. We'll ignore that for now; it's beside the point of the current discussion."

Rumi took out a little bear plushie from somewhere and held it by the legs, making it sway around on the table.

"When you're performing *Ushi No Koku Mairi*, you have to be careful you aren't seen. Otherwise, not only will the curse have no effect but it will also rebound back onto you, the caster. That's curse reversal in action. In other words, if you know someone is planning to curse you in this way, you just need to go and watch them doing it. You'll be safe, and they'll receive all the pain and suffering that was meant for you. An elegant solution, don't you think? Unfortunately, not all curses can be dealt with quite so easily."

She got up and began rummaging through the paperwork on her desk.

"Let's see, I think it was around here somewhere…"

"What are you looking for? I can help."

"No, no, you're a guest. Just wait there a minute."

Rumi continued to sort through the papers, muttering, "Come on, come on…" She found what she was looking for before she reached the third "come on."

"Here we go! It's a pretty old one, but it should still work."

She handed Toshihiko a handmade straw-paper talisman that looked like it had been cut into shape with scissors. The word DEMON had been scrawled on it in messy handwriting, and below that were some strange patterns Toshihiko didn't recognize.

"This is a protective amulet I received from a spiritualist by the name of Ishigami. I don't need it anymore, so you might as well take it."

It sounded like she was trying to unload her unwanted junk on him.

"It's something I just happened to have lying around, so I won't charge you for it."

She flashed him a smug, slightly crooked smile. Yep, this was the kind of person she was, all right. Toshihiko had no idea who this Ishigami fellow was, but if Rumi vouched for him, his skills had to be the real thing.

"So this is a curse reversal talisman?"

Rumi nodded.

"Yes. But Ishigami has his own way of doing things, and that's bound up in the enchantment. He told me its power lies more in protection from the ill effects of curses than actually reflecting them back."

"I see…," Toshihiko muttered, staring at the talisman he'd been given.

"Sorry, I realize it must feel like a letdown."

"Huh?" he replied without thinking and saw that Rumi was smiling at him.

"It's much more satisfying if the person who cast the spell gets their just deserts and goes through the same thing you have, right? Actually, I *do* know a specialist who's good at curse reversals. You met him yourself over in Tosa—"

"I'd prefer not to get him involved."

Toshihiko rejected the idea before Rumi could finish. If the specialist lived in Tosa, there was only one person she could be talking about: Narikiyo Mononobe. He was a shaman living in the

remote mountains of Kochi Prefecture. He was still young, and while not quite as pretty as Toshihiko, he was even more powerful than Rumi. Granted, Toshihiko was an amateur with no real idea where Rumi ranked in her "industry." But according to Rumi herself, anyone who was anyone in the world of paranormal investigation knew who Mononobe was.

Toshihiko had met him once or twice ten or so years ago. They hadn't hit it off. If it had just been a matter of Mononobe's rough way of speaking, he wouldn't have gotten so worked up about it. The young shaman's strongly accented Tosa dialect tended to grate on the ears of born and bred Tokyoites like Toshihiko.

No, the real problem was that Mononobe clearly harbored some kind of animosity toward him. Rumi had looked over at them and said, "Oh, are you in a bad mood today, Mononobe?" which pretty much confirmed his suspicions. It wasn't as if Toshihiko had done anything to offend the man or vice versa. People didn't always get along. There was no real reason; it was simply a fact of life.

Even so, Toshihiko wanted to avoid crossing paths with Mononobe again if he could help it. He disliked the indiscriminate affection that people showed him purely based on his appearance, but that kind of groundless dislike was just as irritating.

"Yeah, that might be for the best," Rumi agreed.

She'd doubtless noticed that there was no love lost between the two of them. But she hadn't tried to mediate or force them together. That was very like her.

"He's such a purely virtuous man, so he must find it hard to be around people like you."

Toshihiko was in no position to object. Rumi knew all about his unsavory habit. He doubted she'd told Mononobe about Toshihiko's stalking tendencies; the young shaman had probably used his powers to sense what kind of person he was. And Toshihiko disliked Mononobe just as much. It wasn't anything in particular about him, simply a general feeling of poor affinity. In a weird way, it made

sense. If Mononobe represented absolute good, it made sense that an outcast like Toshihiko wouldn't be drawn to him.

"And if we did ask Mononobe for help, it would be tantamount to asking him to kill the woman who's cursing you. I'm guessing you'd consider that a step too far?"

Toshihiko thought for a moment, then nodded. Midori was annoying sometimes, and the letters and the attack on Mirei had definitely crossed a line. But that didn't mean he wanted her dead. Getting her to stop would be enough for him.

"In that case, take this for now. Carry it with you at all times."

"Thanks. How much do I owe you?"

Rumi shook her head.

"I told you before, this is just something I happened to have on hand. No payment needed."

"I couldn't possibly do that. Not after you went to the trouble of meeting with me and listening to my problems."

"If anything, I'm sorry this is the first time I've been able to do anything for you. I really am grateful to you for everything you've done for me, *Sir Toshihiko*."

He felt happy to hear her call him by his old nickname again. She'd probably done it deliberately to cheer him up, but he didn't care.

"You've followed me to all kinds of peculiar places, and there were a couple of cases I couldn't have solved without your help," said Rumi.

"Because I make such good bait, right?"

"See? You're even aware of just how much an asset you are."

Their eyes met, and they both smiled. Toshihiko felt like he'd gone right back to his high school days.

"At least let me pay to have your hand treated."

Rumi held up her hand as if to signal him to stop. The blood had stopped flowing, but the long horizontal cut across her palm still looked painful.

"Oh, all right. I'll go to the hospital and send you the bill. But I won't take anything from you now. And if anything else happens, let

me know."

"You mean it's not over?"

"I'm afraid not."

Rumi let her injured hand fall to the side and held up a finger on the other hand.

"I doubt this solution will produce such clear-cut results as Mononobe's curse reversal would have. But this talisman should at least allow you to expose the culprit. When that does happen, there's no guarantee she'll agree to talk things out with you. Be aware of that, Mr. Katayama."

She was back to using a formal mode of address. He nodded without commenting on it.

"Do you think you'll be able to handle her?"

"Hmm…"

Toshihiko was pretty confident in his ability to convince others to let him have his way. It wasn't a skill he'd consciously cultivated, just another side effect of his beauty. People tended to want to please people they found attractive, and that had its uses.

In this case, though, they were talking about someone who had cast a curse. That was something no normal person would even think of doing. Midori—if it was her—wasn't thinking rationally. He could flash a pretty smile at her and deliver a charming "Come on, knock all this off," but he found it hard to believe that would work. Really convincing her to back down would be difficult. He told Rumi so now.

"I said that we were dealing with an accomplished hexer, remember? We've been talking under the assumption that she harbors ill will toward you, but it's possible that she's doing it subconsciously. She could be unaware of her power or how her feelings for you are influencing it. Not everyone with supernatural abilities works in a job like mine. If the culprit is doing this without realizing, there's no point in trying to talk to her to begin with."

That made sense.

"If solving conflicts was as simple as sitting down the two parties involved to talk to each other, there would be no need for people like me. Obviously, it's better if we can resolve things quickly and peacefully, but we need to consider the worst-case scenario, too. So if anything else happens, contact me at once. I can't promise I'll come rushing, but even if I can't be there, I'll find a way to help you."

That was the kind of reassurance he would have liked to write on a sticky note and stick to Detective Kamemura's forehead.

"And will *that* be something you'll charge me for?"

"Of course. I have to make a living, too, you know."

Rumi gave an overly dramatic laugh. Toshihiko couldn't help breaking into a smile as well.

He thanked her one more time and got to his feet. As he was leaving, he suggested the two of them go to dinner someday, this time not as a work thing. Smirking, Rumi said she'd consider it if he was paying.

2

Toshihiko received a message from Miyoshi saying that the results of his experiment were ready. He'd have to go and see him again soon, but he wasn't feeling up to it. Ever since Rumi had given him the "protective" talisman, the number of supernatural attacks on him had actually increased.

He had gone into a café alone but was brought three glasses of water. He had been driving in his car listening to music, when a woman's scream came over the radio. Something had bumped into him while he'd been out walking at night and knocked him down, but when he looked around, there was nothing there.

Little incidents like that, the kind you might hear of in any urban legend, were bad enough, but the letters had also started coming again. He hadn't read through them very thoroughly, but the animosity seemed to have eased up, and they were now mostly just filled with the sender's delusions about the happy life she and Toshihiko were going to live together.

After he'd built up a backlog of them, he made copies and sent them to the police, though he knew this was nothing more than a gesture at this point. The effort only wore down his fragile nerves even more. Maybe there was some power contained within the letters that was acting on him, like the kind that had hurt Rumi after she tore up one of the notes. This wasn't the kind of thing he could ask someone else to check, so he had to do it himself.

He'd gotten in touch with Rumi and told her that, as much as he appreciated her giving it to him, the talisman didn't seem to be doing a very good job.

"But nothing serious has happened, has it? Have you been injured? Have you seen this woman in person yourself? You haven't, right? There it is. The talisman is working as intended."

He hadn't expected the little paper charm to solve all his problems, but this still felt underwhelming. He hadn't seen any new apparitions, but that didn't mean he was in the clear. These hallucinations and strange incidents were still stressful, even if they weren't resulting in physical injury.

"If something happens, let me know the time and place it occurs. If you're able to record any sounds, send a copy to me."

After that, he started keeping a kind of incident log. Sending one each and every day had drained him even further, though.

The worst thing was when he'd started hearing the grinding noise at work.

At first, he'd thought a student was restlessly tapping their foot or something. He turned around to call them out on it, but all the kids were working hard copying notes from the whiteboard. All except one, who was slumped face down on her desk. Toshihiko was about to speak up when he realized something: He didn't recognize her.

His class only contained twenty-some kids, and he knew them all by face and name. But this girl, her long black hair spilling over every inch of her desk, was a stranger. The grinding sound was getting louder. The girl slowly raised her head. Toshihiko tried to turn away, but for some reason, he couldn't move like he wanted to. He

caught a glimpse of her thin lips…a slender nose… In just a few moments, he'd see her eyes… It was then that he regained control of his body, and he stumbled backward onto the floor.

The students gave him a weird look and asked if he was all right. He said he was fine and stood up, but the girl with the long hair was gone. Trying to convince himself that he'd just imagined it, he turned back to the board. The moment he did, the grinding started again, louder than ever. After that, he lost the heart to teach a proper lesson. He'd simply handed out some worksheets and had called it a day.

From that point on, Toshihiko kept hearing the grinding noise. It was so bad that he was afraid to turn around and look at the students. Midori even had to admonish him, saying that everyone thought there'd been something off about him lately. She hounded him to the point that seeing her face made him feel ill. He somehow managed to get through it, apologizing and giving some feeble excuse. But he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep this up.

In the midst of all this, Miyoshi's message was like a shining beacon of hope. With the system the man had developed and its frightening accuracy, they'd be able to confirm beyond all doubt that Midori really was the one behind this. Toshihiko would show it to the police, of course, but he'd also confront Midori herself. Faced with definitive evidence, she would have to back down.

Rumi had said talking things out was unlikely to solve the conflict, and Toshihiko agreed with her. However, he was beyond the point of thinking about the situation calmly and rationally. He was desperate enough that he *had* to believe it would change something.

On the train on the way over, he had trouble breathing. After looking around to check no one was watching, he pulled down his mask and took some deep breaths.

"Excuse me…"

Apparently, he hadn't been careful enough. A woman was calling out to him. Toshihiko would have ignored her, but it was hard to do that when she was staring at him head-on.

"Yes, what is it?"

He tried to sound as cold and standoffish as possible. But something was wrong. The lady's voice was shaking. Not because she was nervous or afraid—it sounded like she was holding back laughter. Her thick lipstick was smudged, going a little over the edges of her lips.

"Well, I… Heh-heh… It's just…"

She broke into a loud peal of laughter. Something was definitely not right here. She was a tall woman who looked to be in her late twenties. She wore a feminine one-piece dress, and aside from the thick makeup, there was nothing especially strange about her. But she was cackling so loud that even words like *guffawing* wouldn't do it justice. And no one else on the train seemed to notice or care. Toshihiko's unease was rapidly turning into terror. Why was a woman going crazy with laughter not attracting any attention?

"You're being fooled."

She pointed at him and laughed again.

"You're being fooled, and you don't even know it! You're clueless!"

Still cackling, she brought her face close to his.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

The noise was right next to his ears.

"You really are—"

Her face was so close that her red, red mouth seemed to fill his entire view. There was the sound of something ripping. Toshihiko instinctively screwed his eyes shut.

The next thing he knew, an announcement was playing. He furtively cast his eyes about but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. The other passengers seemed just as impassive as before. He thought back to what Rumi had said. She had seen the mark of a curse on him coming from a tall woman with black hair. Was that whom she meant?

The only tall woman with black hair in his immediate circle was Midori. He'd been certain she had to be the mysterious stalker. She was quite a bit taller than Toshihiko and had a slender build. She fit

the bill in terms of pure physique. But he'd gotten a clear view of this woman's face just now, and she looked nothing like Midori. Could she have been some kind of psychic manifestation? The curse itself in physical form? Midori had classic, understated features, but this woman's makeup lent her a much flashier appearance. Did she represent a hidden desire to stand out more?

Toshihiko took a breath and prepared to get off the train. Scraps of paper were lying at his feet. It was the remains of the talisman Rumi had given him.

3

Miyoshi hadn't asked to meet Toshihiko at the lab this time. Instead, he'd sent him the address of an apartment building in Shinbashi. That was probably where he lived. Toshihiko was already feeling close to his limit, but reaching his destination gave him some measure of relief. He pressed the intercom at the entrance, got Miyoshi to buzz him in, and ascended to the twenty-fifth floor in the elevator. A model he'd seen on TV was also there and got off one floor earlier. The rent for this place had to be through the roof.

When Miyoshi opened the door to greet Toshihiko, he seemed a little different from before. Maybe it was because he wasn't wearing his lab coat? No, Toshihiko was more used to seeing him out of it when they went to events together. It must have been something else.

"Thanks for coming all this way."

Miyoshi smiled, narrowing his eyes and transforming his face into a smile emoji.

"Like I said before, I should be the one thanking you," said Toshihiko.

The same as at their last meeting, his friend replied that he was just happy to see him. Miyoshi ushered him inside and told him to sit down on the sofa. The sofa was made of leather and had a distinct aura of luxury about it.

While sipping the tea Miyoshi brought him, Toshihiko finally realized what it was that felt different: His friend's usually messy hair

was straight now. His beard had been trimmed, too, giving him a much tidier appearance. Combined with his impressive physique, he now looked like some kind of famous Korean actor.

"You okay, Katayama? Your skin's…"

"I'm fine. It's a little hot out, that's all," Toshihiko replied.

After that ordeal on the train, he probably looked incredibly pale.

"No, I just meant your skin looks good. But we don't want you getting heatstroke. Wait a sec."

The sound of Miyoshi's slippers on the floor echoed throughout the spacious apartment. The place was mostly empty. Apart from the sofa, there was only a small fridge with some sports drinks inside it. Miyoshi took one out and handed it to Toshihiko. He gulped it down gratefully, feeling the life slowly but steadily return to him.

"Sorry, I should have thought of that. It's better to have something cold on a hot day."

"It's fine. Thank you. I'm feeling a little better now," Toshihiko said, looking around the room. "Pretty big place you've got here. You a minimalist or something?"

"I'm actually getting ready to move out."

Toshihiko nodded, understanding, and put the plastic bottle down.

"Sorry to skip the niceties, but about that thing…"

"Right."

With a bottle of mineral water in one hand, Miyoshi sat down next to him. Their shoulders were touching only slightly, but it was still enough for him to feel his friend's muscular frame.

"Katayama, do you have any idea how much money it takes to develop something like this?"

Miyoshi gulped awkwardly. A drop of water fell from his plastic bottle and splashed onto Toshihiko's lap, leaving a wet spot. He looked over at his friend's face. He was staring into the distance, his expression not giving anything away.

"Can't say I do. Must be a lot, though."

Toshihiko wasn't totally clueless about why Miyoshi had asked that question. He probably wanted to stress how big of a favor this was

and to ask for something in return.

"I'm prepared to pay you for the trouble. If it's not enough, then __"

"I've got plenty of money," Miyoshi said, cutting him off. "Katayama… You really don't understand the value of what you have."

Miyoshi reached over and grasped his jaw.

"I've always thought that. There's not a person on this earth who wouldn't take notice of you."

His fingers were digging in so much that it hurt. But Toshihiko couldn't brush Miyoshi off. He couldn't even say anything to break this weird mood. All he could do was gaze at the image of himself reflected in Miyoshi's doleful eyes.

"It must have been destiny. I was walking along Shinbashi, and there you were. Even with your mask on, I knew it was you. No chance there are two people out there as handsome as you. Nobody seemed to have any idea where you went after graduating. I thought I'd never see you again. But I guess we were fated to meet. It was pretty tough making it happen, though. My instincts aren't great, so I just had to go to every kind of event you might show up at."

Toshihiko thought about the day he'd met Miyoshi at that screening. It had looked like Miyoshi was enjoying himself. At all the other horror-themed events they'd been to together, he'd always seemed genuinely interested. When he chatted with guest speakers about their work, he was passionate and friendly, like he'd met a kindred spirit. Was he saying everything had been an act? Those were some impressive performance skills. This guy really was a genius.

"So it was all…"

Toshihiko grunted as the truth dawned on him. Seeing that he was putting things together, Miyoshi smirked.

"Like I'd have any interest in horror. It's all a bunch of made-up nonsense. Anyone who gets excited about that stuff is an idiot. Most

of them are so ugly, they shouldn't even be allowed outside. But I went along with it for you. Love makes you do crazy things."

He brought his face close to Toshihiko's. Their foreheads touched once, twice, three times. He stroked Toshihiko's cheek like a girl with a new doll.

"I did it all for you."

Everything finally fell into place. Well, at least Toshihiko knew now. This whole thing had been a mistake from the outset. He recalled what Rumi had said about him attracting unwanted looks. He wasn't really sure if this qualified as unwanted or not, but it was a stark reminder of his inability to have normal human friendships. Anyone who came into contact with Toshihiko inevitably went a little crazy. Sometimes from jealousy, other times from infatuation or lust. Some warped emotion would unavoidably prevent him from building a proper connection.

Miyoshi was licking his ear now, but he didn't feel repulsed by it. Maybe that was because he and Miyoshi were the same. Both gifted in their own ways, both never really fitting in. "*Let's try to get along from here on, one outcast to another*," he'd said. Sadly, it didn't look like that was going to be possible.

"Okay, fine," Toshihiko said. Shortly. With resignation.

Miyoshi looked up in surprise. Toshihiko gave his consent again, just to make sure everything was crystal clear.

"Do what you want with me."

4

"Mind if I take another of those drinks from the fridge?"

Miyoshi waved a hand in approval, his back turned. Toshihiko got out of the bed and headed for the minifridge. Once again, he was impressed by how spacious and empty the living room was. In spite of all the lies, the part about Miyoshi moving out was probably true. Toshihiko shoved aside the clothes that had been haphazardly discarded on the sofa and took a gulp of mineral water. It relieved a little of his weariness.

"Why are you…?" Miyoshi still wouldn't look at him. "How can you be so casual about this?"

Toshihiko sighed. This man, who was almost eight inches taller than him, suddenly looked very small.

"If I'd gotten all emotional and started crying, would you have stopped?"

Miyoshi had let his passion control him at the start of it. He'd been pretty rough, but as time went on, he began to regain some of his composure. That was when fear had crept into his eyes. Eventually, *Miyoshi* started to look like he might break down and cry at any moment.

"I don't think I could have," he mumbled softly.

"It's not like it was my first time, either."

Toshihiko had a hard time understanding love. He loved his mother, and he'd had strong feelings toward Eiko, but everyone else in the world was just the same to him. He never felt the urge to treat any of them differently than the others. He doubted if he ever would. For someone who aspired to a "normal" lifestyle, that was a pretty terrifying prospect.

He'd chosen to believe he just hadn't met the right person yet. He'd tried out several "test runs" to see if his feelings would change. Men, women, people who didn't fit into either of those boxes. But in the end, none of them made him feel the way he was supposed to. If pushed for an answer, his feelings for Rumi came the closest. But it wasn't as if he wanted to get married and spend the rest of his life with her.

"I'm kind of disappointed," Miyoshi said, his voice cracking.

He had some nerve saying that. Toshihiko felt a little envious of him. Miyoshi was gifted, too, but more human than him. He'd idealized the person he loved from afar and became disillusioned when reality didn't live up to his expectations. That said, even after being put through all this, Toshihiko still didn't have it in him to hate Miyoshi.

"Now, in exchange… No, that sounds a little weird, doesn't it? I'm sure going a few rounds with me doesn't actually equate to using your system. But if you've really managed to make an ID, do you think you could show me?"

"It's right over there. Do what you want with it."

Miyoshi got up, his voice gruffer and louder than it needed to be. His face was flushed, and his eyes looked swollen. He pointed across the room to a coffee table with a tablet on it.

"What's your password?" Toshihiko asked. Miyoshi groaned.

"It's your birthday."

He input the eight digits that made up Toshihiko's date of birth and saw several files. He tapped the one labeled M-TOSHIHIKO and opened it. It was the merged model of him and Miyoshi (but mostly him) that he'd seen at the lab before.

"I guess this isn't it."

"Well, obviously not, dammit!"

Miyoshi stomped over to the table, pushing Toshihiko aside. His face was redder than ever now.

"Sorry."

The apology didn't do much. Miyoshi just looked away.

"So… Hey."

"What?"

"You know how I said I was moving?"

Toshihiko nodded, and after an uncomfortable silence, the other man went on.

"I'm going to America."

That made sense. Miyoshi had contributed to that investigation in Montana, after all. He said "they" had requested him and his process. The request must have come from the police. They'd probably been just as surprised by the accuracy of the results Miyoshi's system could produce. And now that they'd seen what it could do, they couldn't very well let him go.

For all the talk about the American Dream, the US was probably even harsher than Japan when it came to people with no obvious

talent. But the flip side was that it promised lavish rewards for anyone with talent it *could* exploit. A genius like Miyoshi would have much better prospects living there.

"How about that? Well, I hope you'll—"

He was going to give some generic statement of encouragement like "I hope you'll keep doing your best over there," but Miyoshi interrupted him.

"Will you come with me?"

Miyoshi took Toshihiko's left hand in his right. He was trembling like a newborn deer.

"You could quit your job. You said you're only doing it because you get a little crazy if you don't feel like part of society anyway. You're fine with whatever job so long as you're around people, right? You may not have all the honors, but you did graduate from the same college as me. There'll be so many opportunities for you. And it'll get you away from this stalker woman, too. She'll never chase you across the ocean. So…"

"I hope you'll keep doing your best over there."

Toshihiko lowered Miyoshi's hand to the table. His friend's thin smile stiffened and eventually disappeared. He poked around on the tablet and practically threw it at Toshihiko.

He was bound to see a 3D model of Midori. A tall woman with classic, understated features would be smiling back at him. He looked down at the screen…

"Who the hell is this?"

It was the same woman he'd seen on the train before she disappeared. The same smile. The only response to his questions was Miyoshi's faint sobs coming from the other room.

5

I won't forgive him. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. I won't. After everything I said to him. Everything I told him. I love him. And he betrayed me. Traitor. Traitor. Traitor. If he *had* to cheat on me, couldn't he have done it with that brat? At least then I could

shrug it off as a passing fancy. How can this be happening? He did it with a man. A man. A man. A man. A man. A tall, muscular, brawny man.

This can't be happening. There's no way. He can't fall in love with another man. Did he lie in bed with that man's arms around him like *he* was a woman? Or was he on top, mounting him like a wild stallion? I can't forgive myself for even thinking about these things. It's just impossible.

He has to love a cute woman. He *should* love a cute woman. *He should love me.*

What do I do, Mommy? I don't understand. This isn't how it was supposed to go.

Mommy's asleep. Her pretty face looks so peaceful.

I put a hand to my forehead and try to smooth out the monkey-like creases. But then I realize I don't need to. Mommy is asleep, so it doesn't matter. I shake my head again and again. I start to feel nauseous. No matter what I do, I can't stop thinking about it. About him, with that man, and what they did together. I can't believe it. I won't believe it.

I'm on the verge of throwing up but finally start to think about something else. Somebody has been following me. Anytime I try to talk to him, I feel this pressure, like someone's trying to crush my head. When I look behind me, there's nobody there. It's been happening a lot lately.

That can't be normal. Does it have something to do with how he's been looking so gloomy? It must be. That's why I've had to try so much harder. Harder than anyone. But it's no good. It all started when he went to Iidabashi. I told him I'd go with him. He didn't say no, so I went regardless. But it ended in the worst possible way.

There was a strange woman there, and she chased me off. She even gave me the finger. I wasn't angry at the time. She was far too ugly for me to worry about. Even if heaven and earth were turned upside down, he'd never be interested in her. Pigs like that always

get jealous, and I'm his wife, so I decided to be the bigger person. I didn't think she'd do anything beyond that.

But I was wrong. It's that woman. *She's* the one following me. Because of her, when he was at his lowest, when he needed me the most, I couldn't be there for him. And look what happened. I wasn't able to protect him. Protect him… Yes, I should have protected him.

Now that I think about it, he didn't actually choose to go to that man's apartment. He's just so pretty, so supernaturally attractive that people with those desires target him whether he likes it or not. That man must have threatened him—*that's* why he did all that stuff. He's just a victim.

I wasn't thinking straight. I really am no good when Mommy's not here.

"Heh-heh-heh."

That breathy laugh, it's her. Mommy. She's awake. She slides one of her long legs out of bed and sits up.

"You really are a little fool."

Why would you say that to me?

"I understand why you'd want to think that. But it didn't look like he was being threatened to me."

But it's the only thing that makes sense.

"You just didn't see this coming."

No, shut up.

"He even shared a nice long kiss with him when he went to leave. Did he seriously seem like he was doing that against his will?"

Shut up. I don't want to think about it. He was being threatened.

"But this is good news for you, don't you think?"

Mommy pats my head.

"If he'll sleep with a man, there's hope even for someone like you!"

She bursts out laughing.

Shut up. It's not true.

"Isn't that great?"

Mommy knew. She knew all along. No matter how much time I spent with him, ate meals with him, helped him with his work, exterminated unpleasant women in his life, wore his ring, looked into his eyes, held his hand, wanted his child, wanted him all for myself, no matter how much I loved him, I would never be good enough.

"That's just the way men are."

You're right, Mommy.

"Men will always betray you sooner or later. That's why you have to take action to stop them."

I know, Mommy. I think what you think. I'll do whatever you think is right.

6

While walking on his regular route to the Sasaki Agency, Aoyama found himself looking around with more caution than usual. He had a guilty conscience. He'd brought Nanaka with him without getting her parents' permission. After she told him the Haruko story, he decided it would be best to deal with this situation as quickly as possible. To do that, he had to bring the case to Rumi.

When he told Nanaka he wanted to get in touch with her parents before taking her to the agency, she'd panicked and begged him not to. She'd even said she would rather be stuck with this problem than get her parents involved.

"My mom and dad hate ghosts. They get mad if you just talk about them. They'll get mad at you, too, Kouki. I don't want that to happen…"

When she said that, looking up at him with tears in her eyes, he hadn't had the strength to turn her down. She'd told her parents that she was going over to a friend's house before leaving that morning. As a responsible adult, Aoyama knew he should have insisted that Nanaka be honest with her parents about what they were doing. But he didn't have it in him.

By virtue of his grandfather's exorcism business, Aoyama had grown up in a family where everyone took the existence of the supernatural for granted. Most people weren't like that. Even among

fans of horror and the occult, most only viewed that realm as a form of entertainment, not something they genuinely believed in.

Whenever Aoyama's peers asked him what he was doing these days, he would be deliberately vague about it. He was "helping out" with his family's church, that was all. The idea of being rejected by society was scary enough for a grown man. How much worse must it be for Nanaka, who was only a child and had to fear being rejected by her own parents?

"All right. I'd like to take you to someone who knows about this kind of stuff, but not today. Unlike that classmate of yours, though, this is a real expert. I'll go and ask her to look into it for you. You might have to tell your story again, but for now, I think you should go home and—"

"No!" Nanaka screamed, her face turning red. "I don't want to see Haruko anymore! She's so scary, and… Her face, it's all splotchy and gross…"

In a weird way, her childish choice of words only made it sound scarier.

"Please, Kouki. Let me talk to this lady today. If I ask her face-to-face, then maybe…"

At that point, she slumped to the ground and began to sob.

"But if I take you there without telling your mom or dad, I'll be making you lie to your parents. I can't do that."

"I-I'm not…lying… Kouki…I thought we were friends."

"I…"

It'd been a paper-thin argument, but faced with those imploring eyes, he just hadn't been able to say no. He had to relent.

"You know, looking around like that only makes you seem more suspicious."

This was embarrassing. A grade schooler was giving him tips on how to be inconspicuous.

"You're a cool guy, and you have a really nice, um…vibe? That's what all the grown-ups say about you. There's nothing strange about you and me walking along together."

"Oh, really?"

Aoyama often got told he was "cute," although he was never quite sure whether people meant it in a good way. When he was a kid, he'd been teased for his mixed race heritage and for looking somewhat feminine. Even now, it was rare for him to go very long without meeting someone who seemed to be subtly mocking him in one way or another. He just couldn't shake the feeling that, in other people's eyes, he was someone shady, someone who wasn't to be trusted.

He had an innocent school kid doing her best to encourage him, and he still couldn't stop second-guessing his every move. Some grown-up he was. He tried to show some more confidence and started walking with a slightly wider stride.

The stairs up to the office were steep, but since there wasn't any elevator, they had to climb them anyway. Aoyama had once asked how elderly clients were supposed to get to them, and Rumi had replied that she'd just carry them. He'd actually seen her hoist a client on her back and bring them up the stairs on several occasions. It was surprising and also a little unsettling—if Rumi was this strong in both body and mind, then what did she need him for?

Nanaka did her best to ascend the long flights of stairs. Aoyama rushed up the last few steps to get ahead of her and opened the door to the office. She smiled and walked in after him.

"Rumi, I know it's sudden, but—"

He got as far as that before his breath caught in his throat.

"T-Toshihiko… You're here?" he squeaked.

Toshihiko Katayama. In Aoyama's personal experience, this man was the single most beautiful creature in existence. His beauty was obvious even from a single glance. Sometimes, attractive people were described in terms of resembling famous actors, but there was no one on the same level as Toshihiko. Any attempt at comparison was a fool's errand.

Looking at Toshihiko's face made him think of the fallen angel, Lucifer, the morning star. His looks certainly did have a devilish

quality to them. Aoyama had met him several times before and even worked with him on some cases, but no matter how often they met, he could never get used to his appearance.

It was a kind of beauty that surpassed mundane things like race, age, and gender. One look at him was enough for Aoyama to tense up, making interactions with Toshihiko awkward. Part of it was guilt, too—not liking someone just because they were (incredibly) good-looking was something he was ashamed of.

"It's been a while. Six months, I think?"

Toshihiko tilted his head to the side and smiled. Aoyama instinctively looked away. Nanaka was also looking at the ground, her face blushing bright red.

"He's like an angel…," she murmured.

In a lot of religious images, angels were rather grotesque-looking, with the exception of the four archangels, who functioned like heaven's PR managers. Demons were the ones who were depicted as beautiful human figures. Regardless, anyone would agree that Toshihiko gave the impression of someone on a higher level than normal humanity.

"I hope you're not going to keep ignoring me. I have feelings, too, you know."

Rumi stood up from the sofa in the periphery of his view and walked over to the door.

"Who's the girl?"

"Oh, sorry…" He hastened to explain. "This is Nanaka Yokozawa. Our new client."

"Nice to meet you," Nanaka said, bowing.

"What a polite young lady. Would you like a drink? I'm afraid we only have tea, coffee, and tap water, though."

Rumi took Nanaka's hand and led her to the sofa. It was rare to see her treat a child so kindly. A client had once brought along their elementary-school-age son, and Rumi had said—rather bluntly—that he'd get in the way of the discussion and would have to wait outside. Of course, the client had gotten angry and left. But even if

she disliked kids as a rule, Rumi would probably find a well-mannered one like Nanaka easy enough to get along with.

"I should probably make myself scarce. I'm sure I can go kill some time for a while."

Toshihiko took a quick glance at Nanaka and made to leave.

"I-it's all right… You need the expert lady's help with something, too, right?"

Nanaka still couldn't look him in the eye.

"Are you sure? Isn't there an issue with confidentiality?"

"If the client says it's all right, there shouldn't be a problem. Honestly, though, most people have trouble relaxing enough to speak freely when you're around. Maybe you could sit over there until we're done?"

Rumi pointed to a folding chair propped up against the window on the other side of the room.

"You can look out the window and watch the world going by."

"Whatever you say."

Without a word of complaint, Toshihiko unfolded the chair and took a seat with his back to the rest of them. He and Rumi behaved in such a comfortable, easygoing way around each other. Maybe that was only natural given how long they'd known the other, but it was easy to think there might be a deeper connection between them. In contrast, Aoyama felt like he would always be her bumbling sidekick no matter how much time he spent with her. He couldn't help feeling a little jealous.

"Aoyama."

He snapped back to reality to see Rumi looking at him.

"What's the matter? We can't get started until you serve the tea. You know all I can make is the kind of dashi broth that people would only drink on a dare."

"She's right, you know. It made me wonder if I was being punished for losing a bet."

Toshihiko, still with his back to them, chimed in with a casual wave of his hand. Smiling vaguely, Aoyama went and got the tea bags out

of one of the drawers. Was serving tea all he was good for around here? He felt a fresh wave of insecurity, along with self-reproach for being so jealous of Toshihiko and Rumi's closeness.

He asked Nanaka if she wanted milk. She nodded, and he selected a strong Assam blend that paired well with it. The girl took a sip and said it was yummy, that it tasted like the church. Rumi looked at the girl tenderly. She looked at Aoyama that way, too. Apparently, he was just another well-mannered child to her.

Nanaka took a deep breath, steeling herself for what was to come.

"Um, are you the ghost expert, miss?"

"I suppose I am. I'm a little embarrassed to say that about myself, though. My job is to deal with the paranormal—ghosts, monsters, even gods sometimes."

"So you'll believe my story, right?"

Nanaka's hands were shaking.

"You won't say that I'm being stupid or imagining it all, will you?"

Rumi was silent for a moment, then she returned the donut she was holding to the plate.

"I'll be honest with you. I get cases here where people really are just imagining things. There's a chance it's the same with you. But I can promise I won't belittle you in any way."

She pointed to herself.

"People used to say I was stupid. I know how it feels. There's no way I would subject you to the same thing."

Nanaka smiled in relief. Slowly, haltingly at first, she told the story of how Haruko had appeared in her dreams. Unlike with other clients, Rumi didn't interrupt to start monologuing but listened silently all the way through.

"So, uh, tonight will be the second night…"

Nanaka finally trailed off, and Rumi heaved a sigh.

"It's a small world, as people so often say."

"Ain't that the truth."

Toshihiko was now sitting on one of the arms of the sofa. It'd been hard enough looking at him from across the room. Seeing him up

close gave Aoyama a pain in his chest that was worse than heartburn. Unable to bear it, he looked away so he wouldn't seem too rude.

"Honestly, I'm pretty surprised, too." Toshihiko took several deep breaths before continuing, "Those are all the same places I was attacked."

His voice was shaking, perhaps from fear. He quickly took them through the events that had brought him to the agency. He'd been the victim of some highly unpleasant stalking, along with some peculiar phenomena that made him think the cause was supernatural. He had come to Rumi for advice and was told a powerful curse had been placed on him.

The places he'd experienced the strange events corresponded with the six locations from the Haruko story. All that remained was the last place: "in your house." Nothing had happened to Toshihiko in his own home; that was the one big difference. There had been some kind of mischief done to his front door, though. If you counted that as "in" the house, it all lined up exactly.

"S-So, mister, you're…"

"You can call me Toshihiko."

"Toshihiko… Haruko is attacking you, too?"

He thought for a moment before answering:

"Yeah, I think she might be."

Before Nanaka could respond, Rumi spoke up.

"Do you know why urban legends tend to spread so fast?"

She didn't wait for an answer.

"Sometimes, they're spread deliberately. People say tales of creatures like the Slit-Mouthed Woman and the Man-Faced Dog were just experiments to see how fast and how far a story could reach with the help of both word of mouth and the media. But another theory comes from the element of truth included in them."

She turned around the tablet she'd been fiddling with. The screen showed a list of all the places Haruko had demanded the children search in the story of the seventh mystery.

"These are all real places. The church is probably the easiest to pin down. It's the one run by Aoyama's family, Pádraig Aoba. Right?"

Nanaka seemed a little overwhelmed by Rumi's rapid-fire eloquence. She probably hadn't understood very much after the first question Rumi had asked, but she just about grasped the gist of it, and after a while, she nodded.

"I-in my dream, Haruko told me to go to the church… Once I went past the lake, Kouki's church really was there. It was all dark, and Kouki wasn't around. Neither was his dad… But Haruko told me I had to look for the boy…"

Nanaka began to tremble, her eyes welling up again.

"I did my best to search everywhere I could, but he wasn't there. Haruko said, 'You're useless. You're not good for anything. You should just die.'"

"She sounds like a nasty lady. That's no attitude to take with someone who's doing you a favor."

When Rumi said that, Nanaka's expression eased a little.

"Nanaka, you've got nothing to worry about. Me and these two men are all grown-ups. We don't count as someone from your school, so you can tell us about Haruko without sending her into our dreams. Even if she tries to start trouble, I'll put a stop to it."

She fired off some quick punches like she was shadowboxing. Nanaka smiled ever so slightly. Even Aoyama felt relieved. But then Rumi went on.

"Unfortunately, since you didn't find the boy, that nasty lady will probably visit your dreams again tonight."

She paused to let everyone turn their focus back to the matter at hand.

"Let's look into whether any similar incidents occurred in this area. This is actually something of a windfall. We'll solve both Nanaka's and Mr. Katayama's cases together—two birds with one stone. I'll be looking at incident reports for the rest of the day, so could you go home for now?"

"I can help you out; I've got nothing going on today," said Aoyama.

Things always seemed to go this way. Aoyama would simply watch over the situation as it unfolded, until the case was eventually resolved without him having done anything.

"Okay then, Nanaka, let's get you home."

The girl nodded timidly.

"So I'll…I'll still have to see Haruko again tonight?" she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Wait a sec."

Rumi called out to the girl before she left.

"Wear this to bed tonight… Actually, that might not be enough. Wear it all the time from now on, just in case."

She took a beaded bracelet from her wrist and put it onto Nanaka's arm.

"My wrist is about the width of your arm, so it should fit okay. Or I can restring it so you can wear it like a necklace if you want."

"It's pretty…"

Nanaka ran her finger over the colorful beads, gently caressing them.

"It is, isn't it? My mom made it for me," said Rumi.

"Is it okay for me to have it? It must be really important to you."

"Oh, it is. That's why I need you to take good care of it."

While Nanaka was hesitating, Rumi smiled at her. It was a warm expression filled with a kind of affection that would be practically unthinkable for her normally.

"Having said all that, you still need to be careful. I'm not very good at lying, so I'll give it to you straight: We don't have a lot of time. According to what your classmate—Miki, was it?—told you, we have five days left at the most. I'll do everything I can in that time, so I want you to make me a promise in return."

She put a hand on Nanaka's shoulder.

"If we still haven't solved this by the sixth day, you have to tell this story to somebody else at your school. I couldn't bear the idea of a

girl like you having to suffer such a terrible fate. Please, promise me."

She sounded so serious that it brooked no room for argument. But Nanaka cast a troubled gaze around, then looked back at Rumi with a weak smile.

"I'm sorry, I can't do that. If you really can't do anything, Kouki and I will just pray that I won't go to hell after all," replied Nanaka.

"…I see."

The light glinted off Rumi's glasses, making it impossible to tell what kind of look she had in her eyes.

"In that case, Aoyama will get in touch with you later."

She removed her hand from the girl's shoulder. Her affectionate demeanor had vanished like mist. Ushering Nanaka out, Aoyama seemed to feel eyes on him. He turned around, but both Rumi and Toshihiko were looking intently at the tablet.

7

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 5:3. One of the most famous of Jesus's teachings. Aoyama wasn't officially a minister yet and wasn't used to being in the position of teaching anything to anyone. Somehow, though, he'd ended up running a Bible study-cum-English language class, and it was actually quite popular.

It had started as a course where children could learn basic grammar and vocabulary using the Bible as an aide. But soon, housewives with time on their hands during the day who wanted to better themselves and older people who'd retired and needed something to do also showed interest in it. The demand was great enough that Aoyama had established a class for adults on weekday afternoons.

His sister Shouko *was* a qualified minister and good at teaching to boot, but the congregants all insisted they wanted Aoyama to take charge. Apparently, the reason for this was just that he looked somewhat Caucasian. Mr. Toshioka, an old man who'd been coming

to the church since his grandfather's day, had said, "It's better to learn from a native, if that's the word I want."

Obviously, Aoyama wasn't a native speaker. Far from it. But he must have given off the impression he was one. Most microwave dinners were basically the same on the inside, but the ones with popular characters on them were bound to sell better. It was the same thing here. To have people select him but not necessarily because of his abilities gave him mixed feelings.

There probably weren't any people coming to the class who really wanted to improve their English skills. What they actually wanted was a meaningful way to use their spare time. And that quest for meaning made them serious about it in their own way.

"Teacher, I have a question."

"Oh, yes?"

He turned in the direction of the voice to see Emi Shimamoto raising her hand. The way several stray strands of her hair fell across her face made her look very delicate and pretty.

"It's about this 'the poor in spirit' part. We'd say *kokoro no mazushii hito* in Japanese, I think. Doesn't that mean someone who's mean or stingy? Why should heaven belong to people like that?"

Her question wasn't related to English per se, but it was a reasonable one. Aoyama had wondered the same thing when he was a boy. He'd only understood once he read a book called THE MESSAGE: THE BIBLE IN CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE by Eugene H. Peterson, an American minster. This was a new translation from the original Greek and Hebrew designed to be easier to understand for modern readers. In that translation, "the poor in spirit" had been rephrased to put more emphasis on people who lacked support for their spiritual convictions.

He knew he'd just be parroting Peterson's words, but it seemed like the best answer.

"It might be better to think of this passage as 'blessed are those who are persecuted because of their righteousness, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven.' That should make it easier to understand. In other words, heaven waits for those who suffer in this life."

"We're getting off track. This has nothing to do with English. Ms. Shimamoto, if you're going to ask questions, try to keep them relevant."

Mrs. Shimoda, a local housewife, had cut in with an objection. She was a devoted churchgoer who attended services practically every day. For one reason or another, she seemed to get awfully prickly around Emi.

"And you, Mr. Aoyama. You shouldn't give special treatment to her just because she's pretty."

"That's not what I'm doing."

Mrs. Shimoda furrowed her brow exaggeratedly. Emi Shimamoto was beautiful; that much was true. With her dewy, downcast eyes, lustrous black hair that reached down to her waist, and curvy figure, a lot of men would probably consider her the perfect woman.

Aoyama had never put too much stock in physical appearance, however, even during his youth. At most, he had a vague awareness that it was good to keep oneself clean and tidy. The women he'd gone out with didn't have a lot in common visually but had all been highly knowledgeable and fun to talk to. In Emi's case, he recognized the aesthetic value of her appearance but didn't feel anything romantic toward her. All the same, being accused of doing so did make him feel a little awkward.

When Aoyama tried to think about someone who was beautiful, the image that drifted into his mind wasn't Emi but Toshihiko. He firmly believed that it was wrong to judge others purely by appearance. He conceded that humans were inevitably drawn toward the physically attractive. But he felt contempt for anyone who was only nice to good-looking people or discriminated against people who didn't measure up to a certain standard of beauty.

And yet when he looked at Toshihiko, he knew he had no right to look down on those who acted that way. Was there a single human being in the world who wouldn't treat Toshihiko as something

special? Even Rumi, who didn't appear to harbor any particular attraction toward him, would say things like "Don't stare at me like that—you're making me blush" when he was around.

Put simply, Aoyama found Toshihiko terrifying. Whatever the beautiful man thought of him, Aoyama felt self-conscious just from standing near him. Toshihiko probably picked up on that awkwardness. Aoyama hoped he wasn't offended. Remorse would well up within him whenever he thought about it.

"Oh, so heaven is set aside for us…"

Emi's comment, barely more than a murmur, pulled him back to the moment. Emi smiled wanly, unperturbed by Mrs. Shimoda's animosity.

"This 'blessed are' uses an inverted word order for dramatic effect. In normal conversation, it would be more natural to say, 'The poor in spirit are blessed…'"

Curious as to why Emi seemed so pleased, Aoyama went on with the class. But his mind was elsewhere. Specifically, he was wondering if there was anything he could do about this "Haruko" apparition that'd been causing Nanaka and Toshihiko so much trouble. Rumi had said she needed to look into something and left the office. He didn't have any leads he could pursue on his own. The best he could do was tidy up a little and check if they'd received any new requests. More than ever, he felt frustrated at his own uselessness.

"You're a good person, Mr. Aoyama. You'll be fine."

He turned around in surprise. It was Emi. She and Aoyama were the only ones left in the reception room now. Before he could ask her what she meant, Emi waved good-bye and left. She really was a different person now compared with before.

He'd first met Emi at the headquarters of the religious organization she'd been indoctrinated into. She'd hidden behind the young man who had led the cult, claiming in a quivering voice that she was "disgusting" and "a liar" and that only he would ever love her. It hadn't been a surprising attitude, considering what they found out

about the psychological abuse her brother had inflicted on her over the years. Any sense of confidence or self-respect she possessed had been smashed to pieces a long time ago.

Since the conclusion of the case, however, that timid version of her had vanished without a trace. Emi no longer hid her body underneath oversize clothing and seemed constantly gloomy. She wore stylish, expensive-looking clothes and walked with her head held high. Just the other week, when Mrs. Shimoda had accused her of working in a brothel, Emi simply replied with a beatific smile, "My job is to give others love. I'm sure you'd understand if you tried it." At that point, Aoyama's father had interceded and urged them not to judge people by their professions. It was hard to believe Emi could have changed so much in the handful of months she'd been coming to the church.

"What exactly did you say to her?"

Rumi had been the one to rescue her from the cult, so Aoyama assumed she must have had something to do with this transformation. But Rumi had just shook her head.

"I haven't been in contact with her at all. To be frank, I don't care what happens to her from here on. If her life has changed for the better, it's due to your influence, not mine."

Aoyama hadn't really done anything, either. He'd asked after her health once or twice and had told her she was welcome to spend time at the church if she ever wanted to talk. She'd been incredibly suspicious at first, but she seemed a lot more comfortable around him now, like he'd won her trust. The teachings of the cult that had taken her in had been loosely based on Christianity, so she might just have been interested in talking to people with similar spiritual views.

Looking back on Emi Shimamoto's case, Aoyama suddenly remembered something. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before now. He packed up his class resources and headed for the office.

8

Narikiyo Mononobe was a young shaman residing in Shikoku. He didn't live in one of the island's big cities, like Takamatsu or Matsuyama, though. Mononobe's home was a small settlement that seemed to be clinging onto the side of a mountain. His wheelchair made surprisingly smooth progress along the unpaved pathways that ran through the village.

Mononobe had started using a wheelchair after losing both arms below the elbow and both legs below the knee. It had happened some seven years ago—the cost of exorcising a particularly powerful demon. He'd long since accepted his injuries as the consequence of his own conceit, of thinking he could do everything.

Mononobe's eyes were a strange, ethereal color. He had a delicate build, and his wheelchair meant most people had to look down at him, giving him the air of someone who might wither from a single glance. The way he spoke, on the other hand, could only be described as haughty and arrogant, something emphasized by his thick Tosa drawl. It made him come across as less friendly than he really was.

Taken together, these characteristics impressed onto everyone who met Mononobe that he was no normal man. His powers were beyond reproach, and even a nihilist like Rumi considered him her secret weapon. If Mononobe turned down a request and the client chose to go to someone else in the "industry," they would inevitably be turned down. The more experienced the specialist, the greater their certainty that if Mononobe said it couldn't be done, then it really was impossible.

In addition to all his skills and expertise, Mononobe was the kindest person Aoyama had ever met. His words were harsh but not his intent. You could tell from the way he showed such deep respect to other creatures, both human and nonhuman. Even the loss of his limbs was something that had only happened because he'd been trying to save a young girl under frankly impossible circumstances.

Aoyama had heard about all this secondhand. The young shaman always maintained his arrogant facade, almost as if he was intentionally trying to make people dislike him. So how did Aoyama know? The answer lay in his and Mononobe's first meeting. As part of another case, he and Rumi had visited Mononobe to ask for his help. Aoyama had witnessed Mononobe's powers for himself and realized they were nothing short of miraculous.

By just intoning a few words, Mononobe had peered through to the depths of Aoyama's heart. Mononobe had seen that Aoyama still hadn't fully accepted his grandfather's death and was carrying a lot of pain around inside him, then summoned his grandfather's spirit for a short time. Thanks to that encounter, Aoyama had been able to set his grief to rest and start moving forward again.

For that alone, he was more grateful than he could ever put into words, but the shaman had also given Aoyama his protection. It wasn't something that could be seen, but Aoyama felt its effects. They went beyond the scope of minor protections that normal talismans granted. Since meeting Mononobe, Aoyama had found himself in severe danger a lot less often while on supernatural cases.

There was yet another side effect to all this: Aoyama and Mononobe's minds were now connected. The connection might manifest anywhere, anytime. Whatever Mononobe was looking at would be overlaid onto Aoyama's vision. It had to be a side effect of the shaman's protection—what else could it be? It was bewildering, though. The sudden flashes of places he'd never seen, people he'd never met, and events he couldn't possibly understand. They occurred without warning, sometimes in the middle of a conversation. People began to express concerns over Aoyama's mental health.

He hadn't even realized at first that he was sharing Mononobe's point of view. But as he experienced it more, he started to get used to it. The episodes never lasted long, usually ten minutes or so. He developed a knack for excusing himself and retreating to the bathroom to wait until it passed. That wasn't an option if it

happened during services or a class, but even that was something he had learned to cope with gradually.

Aoyama almost looked forward to the visions now, mostly because of how gentle and peaceful they were. Just once, he'd seen something that worried him enough to get in touch with Mononobe and ask about it directly. The shaman's reply had been brusque.

"Heck if I know, man. Don't go callin' me over hogwash like that."

As always, though, he only *sounded* harsh. Aoyama and Mononobe had grown close enough that they got in touch with each other at least once a week.

The memory of Emi's case had made Aoyama think of Mononobe. Rumi had been the one to actually resolve the case, but she admitted that Mononobe had given her the hint she needed to get it done. Why hadn't Aoyama thought of asking him for help before now? Mononobe had power; anybody could see that, even if he claimed curses were little more than party tricks.

Aoyama would call Mononobe not as a friend (he wasn't sure if Mononobe felt the same, but he considered the young shaman a friend nonetheless), but as a professional. Aoyama felt confident that Mononobe would accept the request gracefully. He was such a kindhearted man, after all. Mononobe had been reluctant at first the last time but had ended up giving his all to help Aoyama and Rumi. The week before, he'd mentioned finishing up a big job, so the timing was ideal, too. Aoyama returned to the office and explained his idea to Rumi.

"What do you think? Should I call him?"

Rumi had raised an eyebrow slightly, creating a small furrow in her brow.

"Is that a no?" Aoyama asked.

"It's not out of the question, but…"

"If money is an issue, I can dip into my savings."

"It's not about the money."

Rumi opened her mouth like she was about to say something but just sighed instead.

"I guess it couldn't hurt."

She offered to make the request in Aoyama's place, but he declined. Mononobe answered after just two rings, almost as if he'd been expecting the call.

"Hello, Mononobe? Can you talk right now?"

It was part of their routine for Aoyama to launch into a greeting the moment Mononobe picked up.

"Hey there, y'all doin' okay?"

Aoyama felt a twinge of regret. He needn't have asked—now was definitely *not* a good time. He could hear men and women chatting happily in the background. Mononobe was probably out at some kind of social event.

"Sorry, I'll call you back."

"Nah, ya might as well go ahead."

Mononobe's attitude had softened compared with when they'd first met. When Mononobe spoke to Aoyama now, he sounded less like a gruff old man and more like a middle school boy. He was three years younger than Aoyama, who sometimes wondered if this was what it was like to have a little brother. It was a nice dynamic.

"It's like this…"

Aoyama gave Mononobe an outline of what was going on. The young shaman listened in silence, only interjecting now and then to show he was paying attention. Aoyama had been so nervous about it a moment ago, but once he actually got talking, a sense of calm seemed to wash over him. He'd not only experienced a portion of Mononobe's power for himself but had also heard stories of the things he'd done from Rumi. And he could tell a lot from the flashes of the shaman's life he saw through their shared visions. While Aoyama and Rumi concerned themselves with ghosts and demons, Mononobe tangled with beings more on the level of gods and Buddhas. It would be a cinch to solve a little problem like this.

He might not be able to come in person, but he could probably still point them in the right direction like last time. Mononobe hadn't said

anything yet, but the more Aoyama talked, the more certain he felt it would all work out.

"I thought you could tell us what would be the best thing to do in this situation."

No noise came from the phone's speaker. For a moment, he thought maybe the call had dropped, and he took his ear away to check, but the screen showed that it was still in progress.

"Mononobe?"

"Yeah, I hear ya."

Mononobe's voice sounded incredibly cold. No, perhaps that wasn't the right word. It was more…dry? Strained? The calm that Aoyama had been feeling evaporated. Had he said something rude just now without realizing it? Should he apologize? But he didn't even know what had offended him. As he stood there fumbling for the right words, Mononobe finally spoke.

"Aoyama, I get the feeling yer only focusin' on the good here."

"Focusing on the good?"

"Look, I like you, man. That's why I'm willin' to hear you out for stuff like this."

"And I'm very grateful for it."

He hastened to inject some praise into the conversation. Was Mononobe saying Aoyama was letting their friendship make him complacent? When he took a moment to think about it, he realized that was probably true. Rumi had once told him that Mononobe's usual consulting fee was once closer to a hundred thousand yen than ten thousand. After losing his limbs, he'd called an end to that stage of his career and typically didn't accept money anymore, only taking cases out of the goodness of his own heart.

The clients that Aoyama had seen Mononobe interact with through their link were all elderly or children, the type of truly vulnerable person who couldn't really afford exorbitant fees. Aoyama, on the other hand, was a young man in the prime of his life, and while he wasn't exactly wealthy, he was clearly in a different category than those other clients. For him to expect Mononobe to lend his skills

and experience just because they were friends definitely showed a lack of respect.

"Of course, I'm willing to pay as well. I'm sorry, I should have led with that. I guess I let the fact that we're a little closer now make me careless…"

"Don't you worry none about that."

A loud, raucous laugh briefly drowned out Mononobe's voice. It might have come from a man or a woman; it wasn't very distinct, but it was loud. Mononobe had said he was fine to talk, but he was still a young man on a night out. He would probably much rather be having fun with his friends than suffer through an awkward phone call like this.

"Maybe I should call you back later."

"Quit yer yappin', I'm tryin' to talk here!" Mononobe barked.

His voice was low, but it carried. Even coming through a smartphone speaker, he exerted a pressure that made Aoyama's body tremble. The din of whatever was going on in the background abruptly cut off. As if it wasn't bad enough that Aoyama had sounded so ungrateful, now he'd made things worse with his half-hearted excuses. No wonder Mononobe was mad at him.

"Sorry…"

His voice quivered pitifully.

"Huh? Oh, I wasn't talkin' to you, Aoyama."

Mononobe sounded more like his normal self now. This was the quieter, gentler voice he usually used. There was a sound of rustling cloth. He had to be going outside and away from the group. The thought that Aoyama had forced him away from his friends only made him feel worse.

"Them folks're rowdier'n a bunch of jackrabbits in the springtime."

"Right…"

He agreed just for the sake of saying something—Mononobe's regional expressions could be hard to decipher sometimes. At least the young shaman's anger hadn't been directed at him. Despite his

kindly nature, Mononobe carried himself with the sort of authority that could strike fear into most people's hearts.

"This is what I meant about ya only focusin' on the good. You wanna see the good in everyone, but ya take it too far sometimes. Even everythin' you seen through my eyes ain't changed that. Or… maybe I should say everythin' I shown *you."*

"I, uh… I see."

Once again, it took a bit of work to unravel what Mononobe was trying to say. Aoyama's main takeaway was that the link between the two of them, the visions they shared, was something Mononobe actually had control over. It was a stark reminder of just how next-level his supernatural abilities were, but it also raised a question in Aoyama's mind.

He'd been concerned that these visions were, in a way, an invasion of his friend's privacy. Everybody had things in their lives they didn't want other people to know about. He would never have guessed Mononobe *wanted* to show Aoyama these moments. He'd witnessed Mononobe arguing with his mother, staring off into space, even having sex with a young lady who may or may not have been his girlfriend. All very private experiences. Not the kind of thing you'd normally share with anyone.

Mononobe seemed to guess what Aoyama wanted to ask from the tone of his voice.

"I-it ain't like I was gettin' off on showin' you that stuff. That ain't how I get my jollies."

He sounded a little bit flustered. It was kind of cute to see him acting his age for once.

"But you seen a lot through my eyes, right?"

"Yes. I always end up impressed with how great you are."

"That's 'cause yer only focusin' on the good."

There was a light scuffing sound, probably from Mononobe activating the speakerphone.

"Ya get what I mean now?" he jeered. *"How kin ya possibly call me 'great' after all the miserable failures I shown ya?"*

"You, fail? I don't…"

"Then whatcha call this*?!"*

Mononobe practically spat the words out, and Aoyama was assailed with a terrible headache. He couldn't keep his eyes open. A sound like a frog being squashed escaped his mouth. He couldn't stop it. His eyelids stayed clamped shut of their own accord. This made a normal migraine look tame in comparison. It was like fireworks were being let off inside his skull, and at the same time, images started flooding into his mind.

A woman covered in blisters and pockmarks. A baby doll. A face covered in scales. A young man dragging his feet behind him. A broken tombstone. *Arms won't move.* A girl crawling on all fours. *Can't get down from the mountain.* A black shadow stalking through the forest. A child spending their whole life asleep. *Couldn't save anyone.* A person throwing themselves into a gorge. *Legs won't move.* An old man spitting on me and leaving. *Can't apologize—it's already too late.* Endless rain. Electric cables hanging from the ceiling. Markings on a wall. A smiling woman. *Can't do anything.*

I can't do anything; I just want to end it all. Want to end it.

"Y'see?"

Mononobe's voice seemed to come from a long way off. Aoyama felt a thump on his shoulder. He began coughing violently. Rumi was standing next to him, giving him a fierce glare… No, she wasn't looking at Aoyama, but at his phone. At Mononobe.

"This is why I didn't want to get you involved. I just knew you'd end up doing something weird, Mononobe. What the hell were you

trying to do?!”

Rumi was yelling. This was probably the first time Aoyama had seen her show such open, undisguised emotion.

“Can’t ya just stay put and mind yer business while I’m talkin’ to Aoyama?”

Mononobe’s voice still had that strangely clear, carrying quality. Even with Aoyama pressing the phone to his ear, Rumi could hear him all the same.

“Why should I listen to anything you say?” Rumi showed no signs of backing down. “This man is *mine*. I’ll thank you not to interfere with him.”

Mononobe replied with a self-deprecating laugh.

“My bad. I don’t do so well with subtlety; this was the only way I could make my point.”

Rumi stood there frowning a while longer but finally resigned herself and went back to the sofa. Sensing that she’d left, Mononobe resumed his side of the conversation.

“See what thinkin’ you can do anythin’ gets you?”

Aoyama recalled the stream of nightmares he’d been subjected to. They were things he’d seen before. Things he hadn’t wanted to see. Things he’d tried to ignore, to act like they didn’t exist. He hadn’t wanted to believe some people were so beyond saving that not even Mononobe could do anything for them.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a quavering voice. “You tried to share these experiences with me, and I acted like I hadn’t seen them, asking you for your help like it was nothing…”

“Feels like you still don’t get what I’m tryin’ to say.”

It was a detached way of speaking, but Aoyama didn’t sense any animosity in the words. Mononobe’s tone felt more resigned than anything.

“This ain’t about me. You and Rumi are out there actin’ like you can do it all, that there ain’t no problem you can’t solve.”

Still unsure of what the young shaman was getting at, Aoyama stayed quiet and let him continue.

"Ain't a lot of folks who can do the job we do. That's just the way it is. People admit defeat and pack in the whole thing every day. Still, though…"

There was a clear, bright sound then, like the ringing of a bell. Aoyama began to feel dizzy, but not in a bad way.

"…if you're determined to try even when it does look impossible… This girl who has the curse on her. Look for what you missed. Figure that out, an' you might just find somethin' worthwhile."

"Huh?"

The sudden pivot to a concrete hint took Aoyama by surprise, pulling his hazy consciousness back to reality. The girl Mononobe had mentioned was probably Nanaka.

"The curse… You mean Haruko appearing in her dreams is affecting her in the waking world?"

"Asleep, awake, it's all the same."

"Like the butterfly dream?"

The butterfly dream was an episode from the *Zhuangzi*, a Chinese philosophical text. In it, a man dreams of flying around as a butterfly and looks down to see his sleeping human body. He then wonders if his butterfly form is his true self and if his life as a human was nothing but a dream. Rather than clarifying which is reality and which is dream, the author suggests that anywhere someone exists in the moment is a legitimate reality in and of itself.

"The what now?" Mononobe fired back. *"You know I'm no good at book learnin', man. All I'm saying is, if there ain't nothing to be done, then you're better off not gettin' involved. Ain't no point. But I get that you gotta do what you gotta do."*

Aoyama was about to ask for clarification, but he knew it would lead him nowhere. Mononobe clearly thought this case was too thorny for him to get involved with. Even giving them this hint was going above and beyond. Aoyama promptly thanked his friend for the help. He could hear the background noise starting to pick up again on the other side of the call. There was something he needed to say before he hung up.

"I know I've said this before, but…I don't think Rumi is doing this just because she feels like it. She's the type of person who'll put herself in harm's way to help someone and never demand any gratitude in return. She's somebody I respect from the bottom of my heart. I feel the same way about you."

He got as far as that, then stopped short. Mononobe was laughing. It had been quiet at first, so much so that he hadn't been sure of what he was hearing. But Mononobe's voice had gradually gotten louder, and now the man was laughing loud enough to blow out the phone's speakers.

"Mononobe, what are you…?"

Aoyama crumpled to the ground. His head hurt. It must be happening again. He was going to be shown another string of nightmarish imagery…or so he thought. Instead, he found himself all alone in an unremarkable Japanese-style room. His arms and legs felt strange. He tried to move them, but they didn't budge. He looked down and realized he had prosthetic arms. False legs, too.

"What do you see now, huh, Aoyama?"

The voice seemed to come out of his own mouth. When he tried to reply, he couldn't even get his breath to move through his throat like he wanted it to. Mononobe's voice, on the other hand, vibrated through every inch of his body.

"Can't see nothing, can you?"

What was going on? This wasn't right. He should be able to see *something*. The voice echoed around him on every side. Laughing. Was Mononobe enjoying watching him suffer? Was it all just entertainment to him?

"You wanna see?"

No. Please, no.

"You know you want to."

No. I just want to go home.

"Look sharp now."

Slowly but steadily, an image started to form in the nothingness.

"See?"

The first thing he spotted was hands—a huge, tangled, writhing mass of them. So many hands, all reaching out, grabbing onto him, pleading for help. He couldn't scream. In front of him was a woman. Her lustrous black hair fell over her face. She laughed. He couldn't let her see him.

A skittering sound. An indistinct black form, crawling. A young girl with her guts spewing out, pinned to the ceiling. A large group of men, kneeling reverently and praying. Something crawled out of the woman's mouth. Bugs. Lots of bugs. Baby bugs with human faces. Faces in the pillar. Young and old, male and female, too many to make out, all crying for help. All suffering.

"You see?"

The woman turned around. Her face was melting.

"Everyone wants to die."

He did want to die. He'd rather die than be subjected to this. *Skrsh, skrsh, skrsh*, went the crawling thing. The woman with the melting face looked at him, amused.

"Nah, it ain't that you want to die, right?"

This was hell.

—Across the faraway mountains…—

Someone was singing now.

"Hey."

I'm sorry.

—Gather the seven stones…—

"That woman is deceiving you."

I didn't know.

—Build a stupa with them…—

"She doesn't care about you or anyone else around her."

Not even when you're suffering like this.

—Conceive and grow fruitful…—

"You really oughtta worry more about yourself."

It’s over. She’s seen me. The woman wraps her hands around my neck. Her rotting mouth is an empty cavern wafting fetid breath. *Huff…huff…* I hear it. I can’t tell if she’s laughing or crying.

“Makes my skin crawl.”

Aoyama felt a sharp flick on his forehead. The impact sent him tumbling backward onto the floor. Rumi took his hand and helped him up. The moment he saw her, tears began to flood his eyes. Resisting the urge to cling onto her arm, he somehow got to his feet, then stumbled over to the sofa. His phone was still in his hand, but the screen had gone black. The call had long since ended.

“That little punk…,” Rumi growled. “So, what did you and Mononobe talk about?”

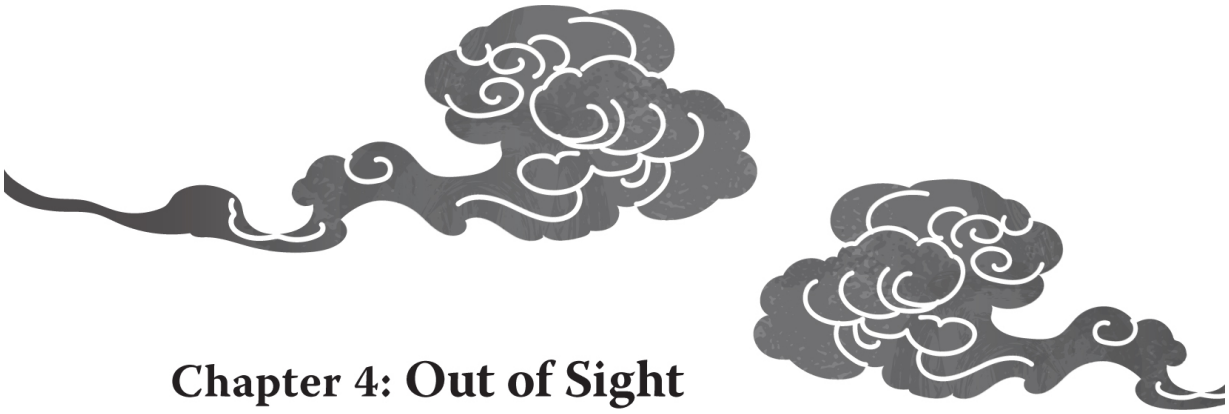
Aoyama considered telling her about the things he’d just seen but then thought better of it. “That woman is deceiving you.” What did that mean? He wasn’t about to start doubting Rumi’s intentions. She had saved him so many times, and regardless of her brusque manner, she’d always been very proactive about helping people. So why did he feel so uneasy all of a sudden?

There were some things even Mononobe was powerless to do anything about. He’d felt Mononobe’s powerlessness firsthand. Aoyama had seen vividly just how Mononobe lived. He still wasn’t quite sure why Mononobe had shown him all that. But he was certain he’d been trying to tell him something. It had to be important for him to go to such extreme lengths. Mononobe wouldn’t lie. What possibilities did that leave?

“My vision kind of went black for a moment.”

“Oh, is that all?”

Rumi seemed relieved enough he was fine and shifted back to her usual lighthearted demeanor. For some reason, Aoyama couldn’t bring himself to look her in the eye.



Chapter 4: Out of Sight

1

Toshihiko walked along the street, looking at his notes.

On the first night, she told him to cross the road by Aoba Lake and look inside the church there.

That church had to be Pádraig Aoba.

On the second night, she told him to climb the jungle gym in Northside Park and look there.

The park was probably the playground on Tetsubozu Street. It was the only park in the neighborhood that had a large jungle gym with a roof that could be climbed on. Local kids and parents called it Northside Park because you got there via the north side of the elementary school.

On the third night, she told him to go to the pedestrian footbridge and search the third stairway from the right.

That had to be the bridge where Toshihiko had fallen down the stairs, the one next to the bus stop closest to the cram school. The stairs on it had eight lanes in all.

On the fourth night, she told him to go behind the citizens' center and search the big parking lot there.

That probably meant the building next to the police station where he'd first reported the incident. Technically speaking, it wasn't a citizens' center so much as a government branch office that dealt with lots of different processes all under one roof.

On the fifth night, she told him to search outside the convenience store on Taisho Street.

There was such a store about a fifteen minutes' walk from Aoba South Elementary, almost exactly halfway between the elementary school and the cram school.

On the sixth night, she told him to go around the back of the Ciel Candy Store and search the drain there.

The Ciel Candy Store had closed some three months ago. The property was vacant now, although it had been a sandwich shop before. It seemed to have changed hands pretty quickly and was due to open as a burger restaurant soon. And it was right next to the cram school.

These were all places where he'd encountered the black-haired woman. Toshihiko had suggested that maybe he'd be safe from running into her again if he just avoided those areas, but Rumi hadn't agreed.

"Your situation does have some remarkable commonalities with Nanaka's story. But we shouldn't assume we can base our movements on that alone. Your encounter on the train and your coworker going crazy show that it's possible for things that weren't mentioned in the story to happen to you. We can't be too careful. Think of avoiding those places as a good precaution, not a surefire solution."

As usual, Rumi's advice made a lot of sense. He could be letting the fact that Nanaka had been so frightened and the way the places had matched mislead him. Even those similarities might be nothing more than a misconception. It was like someone noticing that they

always seemed to check their watch at the same time every day and assuming that particular time held some kind of special significance.

This was a manifestation of the Barnum effect. You saw it in fortune-telling all the time—fraudsters would give general statements that could apply to anyone, and their customers would assume they were talking about them specifically. In the same way, Toshihiko might just be noticing these similarities and assuming there was a common cause behind them.

Taking his current case into account, he'd met the tall woman in every place described in the Haruko story, but they were all locations he tended to visit or pass as part of his daily routine. Maybe those six places just so happened to match up, and there was no pattern, no deeper meaning. And as Rumi had pointed out, he'd also encountered the apparition in areas not mentioned in the story.

More than anything, the grieving mother searching for her poor dead son and the deranged stalker in the flashy makeup didn't seem to have that much in common.

He decided to leave the paranormal side of the investigation to Rumi and focus on the material world. The six places in the story were part of his everyday life, so avoiding them all wasn't really an option. Even now, he was headed toward the police station to show them the data that Miyoshi had put together.

Toshihiko had seen the apparition here a few days ago. A woman had been standing there, her head down and her back to him. He'd tried to hurry past her, but she'd turned around and given chase. He couldn't make out her face in the dark, but he had no doubt it was the stalker.

Up until now, his encounters with the tall woman had been distressing, but he'd never felt his life was in danger. Perhaps that was because of the talisman Rumi had given him. Now that it had been reduced to useless scraps of paper, things might be different. He'd asked Rumi about that, too, and she'd tossed him a rosary—something Aoyama had left at the office.

"He's a Protestant, so he doesn't actually use them himself. They're a devotional tool mostly used in Catholicism. He treats this one with more care than you might expect. Apparently, his grandfather bought it at the Vatican, so it has sentimental value. That said, I believe he has several of them, and he's always leaving them lying around. Go ahead and take it—he'll never find out."

She shouldn't throw around something so precious so causally. She shouldn't lend out other people's possessions without their permission. But telling her any of that wouldn't do any good. Toshihiko doubted this rosary would have the same curse reversing properties as the talisman. The fact that it belonged to Aoyama only made it less convincing.

Aoyama was a good person. Anybody who knew him would agree. Toshihiko had certainly never met someone as kind and considerate as him. Spending time with him seemed to calm the heart and even refresh the body. But that didn't mean Aoyama could be relied upon in matters of spiritual protection. Rumi, who was considerably less virtuous, was much more trustworthy when it came to that kind of thing.

She'd given Nanaka her own bracelet and had fobbed Toshihiko off with some random string of beads that didn't even belong to her. It hardly seemed fair. Especially considering Rumi wasn't usually very nice to children. Sulking about it wouldn't get him anywhere, though, so he'd thanked her and slipped the rosary around his neck. He wasn't a Christian, but he would just have to believe in the spiritual potency of the Vatican this time.

Trying not to pay any more attention to his surroundings than necessary, Toshihiko entered the police station and asked for Kamemura. When Kamemura emerged, the man took one look at Toshihiko and groaned. An overblown reaction like that *had* to be deliberate. The younger officer at Kamemura's side rebuked him. Toshihiko didn't wait for the older man to sit down and got right to business.

"I never did file that Letter of Complaint, you know."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Maybe it wouldn't hurt you to show a little gratitude."

Kamemura looked at him quizzically.

"Anyway, I was hoping I could speak to you alone."

This request clearly put the younger officer in a difficult spot. The same probably went for Kamemura. But his years of experience had clearly taught him how to stay cool under fire.

"Aw, is that a no?"

Toshihiko maintained eye contact and tilted his head to the side coquettishly. It was the kind of gesture that suited a teenage girl more than a man in his thirties. No one but Toshihiko could have gotten away with it. Kamemura cleared his throat and gestured to his partner to leave them. The young officer was spacing out and staring at Toshihiko, but a whack on the knee from Kamemura soon had him scrambling for the door.

"All right, what did you want to talk about?"

Kamemura's fists were clenched tight, and his hands were shaking.

"Don't think doing this will get you any kind of special treatment," he added.

"Doing what, exactly?" Toshihiko asked.

He leaned forward a little. Kamemura carefully averted his eyes.

"There's security cameras in here, you know."

"I'm well aware."

Toshihiko turned to face one of them and smiled.

"Q-quit wasting my time. What do you want?"

He took a USB drive out of his bag and placed it on the table. Kamemura looked from it, to Toshihiko, and back again.

"I have a picture of the culprit on this."

"What?!"

Pressing his advantage, Toshihiko proceeded to explain.

"A used menstrual pad was stuck to the door of my house. It still had plenty of blood on it. I used the DNA to reconstruct an image of the stalker's face."

“Why didn’t you tell us about such an important piece of evidence?”

“I wanted to see if I could do something about it myself first.”

Kamemura scratched the back of his head, letting out a groan of frustration. After a moment, he seemed to calm down and turned back to Toshihiko.

“No way. Absolutely not. There’s no way that’s even possible. You can’t *do* that. I don’t know if you think you can fool me because I’m just some Community Safety schlub, but once I get the lab to take a look at this, they’ll—”

“I don’t expect you to believe me.”

Eyes still fixed on Kamemura, Toshihiko reached out and grabbed the man’s sleeve, running a finger over his wrist to relax his muscles and massaging his now open palm.

“But it’s true. I can’t say for sure if the image on here really is the woman who’s behind it all. At the very least, though, she’s involved. This is all I can do on my own. But you should be able to find out who this woman is, right?”

He caressed Kamemura’s hand with his thumb.

“Please? For me?”

The detective sprang to his feet as if an electric shock had run through him. In that moment, their hands separated.

“Naganuma!”

He’d barely spoken when the younger officer came barreling back into the room.

“Wh-what is it, sir?!”

The officer—evidently named Naganuma—saw Kamemura’s bright red face take on a troubled expression.

“Mr. Katayama is leaving.”

“Oh, right…”

Naganuma opened the door, still stealing furtive glances at Toshihiko’s face.

“Make sure he gets to the exit okay, will you?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

Toshihiko followed the young officer out, pausing just once to turn and smile at Kamemura.

"I'm counting on you."

He left without waiting for a reply.

Outside the police station, he realized he was shivering. He felt chilled to the bone. It wasn't because the AC had been on too high. If anything, it had been so warm, it was stifling in there. He'd been sweating the whole time.

What Toshihiko had just done to Kamemura was something he'd learned in a book. If his memory served, it was called HOSPITALITY TIPS FROM A FORMER NUMBER ONE ROPPONGI CABARET GIRL. Get your customer one-on-one. Make eye contact. Speak shortly, slowly, and whisper gently. Make frequent physical contact. The palm has a lot of nerves, so treat it with particular care.

Once Toshihiko tried it, he'd soon realized it wasn't the kind of thing a man his age could work into casual conversation. Even taking Toshihiko's overwhelming beauty into account, it could easily come across as off-puttingly familiar. Kamemura had blushed but probably not exclusively from positive feelings. There had likely been a lot of bewilderment and fear mixed in as well.

Going in, Toshihiko hadn't possessed any real idea if this borderline seduction approach would work. It would be nice if Kamemura was inspired to do some extra investigating, but the whole thing had been a gamble. He couldn't expect too much. All he could do now was wait for Rumi to contact him with further developments.

He turned to look up at the police station one more time. He found his gaze drawn to a window on the second floor. Somebody was waving. Kamemura? Naganuma? Toshihiko strained his eyes to see better…then wished he hadn't. It was a woman who was waving at him. A wide smile was plastered across her face, like she could barely contain her happiness. And now that he'd seen her, he couldn't peel his eyes away. He couldn't hear the woman's voice from here, but her mouth was moving.

"Won't…"

His feet were rooted to the spot. He felt like he'd merged with the ground itself.

"…be…"

Even with all the other people walking to and fro, the tall woman alone stood out.

"…long…"

Suddenly, his sides felt hot. More than hot—burning. The pain finally got his legs moving. He ran as fast as he could. He didn't know if all this would do any good. "Won't be long." Not long until what? Nothing pleasant, that was for sure. He seemed to hear the grinding noise close by. At least, he thought he did. He was just imagining it, wasn't he? Or was he? He didn't know. The woman's uncanny smile remained seared into his mind.

2

Going back to his old elementary school for the first time in years, Aoyama was first struck by how small the place looked. He'd been on the shorter side when he was a kid, so he got a strange satisfaction out of feeling big now. He'd asked Nanaka if he could come here to talk to her friends—Miki in particular.

This was an independent investigation, not something Rumi had told him to do. He wasn't trying to distance himself from her because of what Mononobe said. The young shaman was dealing with things anyone would struggle to endure. He lived like that every day. And not just him—it was probably the same for anyone who could see the supernatural. Assuming he—or Rumi, for that matter—did what he did out of pure selfless virtue would be an insult.

Aoyama was starting to realize he'd put Rumi on a pedestal ever since she'd saved his life in college. He tried his best to work with her as an equal, but deep down, that wasn't really possible. He had immense respect for anyone who could experience the kind of

hellscape he'd seen and still dedicate their time to helping others. But blindly trusting whatever she said wasn't healthy, either.

With that in mind, he'd used his own personal judgment to find something he could do to help. That led him to the idea of investigating at the school. Mononobe had said it was "all the same," asleep or awake. He hadn't gone into any more detail, so Aoyama couldn't be sure if he'd got the message. But it sounded like Mononobe was telling him to look into how the Haruko dream was affecting the real world. In that case, the best thing to do was to ask the people who'd actually experienced it.

Of course, he was a grown man asking to talk to elementary school kids, so he had to be careful. No matter how much Nanaka might claim he was cool or had a nice vibe, it would still look suspicious. He'd been sure to get permission from the school before proceeding. Once they heard he was attached to the Pádraig Aoba Church, they were surprisingly accommodating. He'd been expecting a lot more resistance.

Changing into indoor slippers in the entrance hall, he was greeted by the teacher in charge of Nanaka's class, Ms. Sawako Akino. She beckoned him into the elevator and guided him to a reception room on the far side of the third floor. A cup of tea was already waiting for him on the table when they arrived.

"I'm sorry to put you through all this trouble."

"It's no trouble at all, especially given everything your grandfather did for us."

Ms. Akino gave a hearty laugh. Aoyama hadn't been completely honest about why he was here. Saying it was part of a paranormal investigation *would* have made the school suspicious of him. He'd simply said he was concerned that the children were being scared by some urban legend lately and that he wanted to talk to them to help put them at ease. Fortunately for him, the school had assumed this was some kind of impromptu counseling session. It wasn't a million

miles away from the role his grandfather had filled for the community years before. Just one more reason to be grateful to the old man.

"I really don't understand why the children like scary stories so much. I suppose we were like that at their age, too, what with *Angel-san* and whatnot… Oh, but you're rather young, Mr. Aoyama, so you probably wouldn't know about that. It was like a version of *kokkuri-san*. Of course, *that* caused mass hysteria and foaming at the mouth, so it got banned almost right away."

Aoyama knew about *kokkuri-san*. It had enjoyed a sudden surge of popularity a generation or so back, not just among school kids but among high school students and adults, too. It was something used in spiritualism, similar to western table-turning or Ouija boards. During the game, a group of people sat around a table together and attempted to receive messages from the spirit world.

Scientifically speaking, there was nothing spiritual about it. The participants simply put themselves into a suggestive state, believing that the spirits really were listening, and subconsciously moved a coin on a board themselves. That was the widely accepted explanation of it. It had even been tested. In a group of randomly selected participants, the coin would fail to point to the correct answer if no one at the table knew it already. In groups that didn't believe in the supernatural, the coin never moved at all.

The mass hysteria incidents that Ms. Akino had mentioned had really happened during the height of the craze, though. Supposedly, you would become possessed if you forgot to send off the *kokkuri* spirit or broke the rules in some other way. The incidents had been caused by belief in those stories—another form of self-suggestion, according to Rumi.

Kokkuri-san came with a specific set of rules. The more people stuck to those rules, the more likely they were to believe they were rooted in reality. They would think there really was a *kokkuri* spirit, it really was the one moving the coin, and it really would punish anyone who broke the rules. Most of the people who reported

strange side effects turned out to have been prone to suggestibility and hysteria from the very start.

The appearance of actual victims elevated *kokkuri-san* from a simple children's game to something greater, attracting more and more people until it became a countrywide craze. As society changed, it became less popular, but even today's kids still did it from time to time.

The Haruko story could probably be explained the same way. It wasn't so different from "Seven Mysteries of the school" stories that were told around the country. And with its specific, real-life setting and strict rules and punishments, it was no wonder it exercised such a fascination over young, impressionable minds.

"I suppose being scared can be fun sometimes."

Aoyama tried to offer an explanation, but Ms. Akino only replied that she *hated* anything scary.

"Well then, I'll go and get the children."

Aoyama watched Ms. Akino leave, then took off his jacket. Despite having gone to this school when he was a kid, this was the first time he'd been in this room. It didn't look like it was used very often; the air felt dusty. Against one wall was a cabinet with a horse ornament on the top of it and a stone commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the school's founding.

More than fifteen years had passed since Aoyama was a student here. His grandfather's genes had skipped a generation, making him look considerably more Caucasian than his father. Combined with his slight figure, that had made him a target for teasing but nothing that could be called bullying. He'd had friends, and the teachers had mostly been nice, too.

He thought of Rumi. What had she been like in elementary school? Probably just as knowledgeable and passionate about the paranormal as she was now. A bright, lively girl. If he'd met her back then, he'd definitely have liked her. They probably would have become friends, and then maybe he wouldn't keep overanalyzing what he meant to her like he did now.

A knock at the door jolted him out of his fantasy.

"Come in."

Aoyama was scheduled to talk to a total of five kids, including Miki, for ten minutes each. Under the guise of providing counseling, he'd be alone with each of them while Ms. Akino waited at the door. He was used to dealing with children from his work at the church, but he was also aware that they were all *churchgoing* kids. They were probably a little different from the average grade schooler. Kids could be cruel sometimes. Maybe they would think of him as some creepy old guy and refuse to tell him anything.

Still fretting over these imagined scenarios, he waited for the first child to come in, but the door remained shut. He was just stepping forward to open it himself, when there was another knock, much louder than the last one.

"Y-yes, I'm coming."

Even as he spoke, he could tell that something was wrong. His hand stopped on the doorknob. Another three knocks. "They can't enter without permission," Rumi had told him once. The knocking became faster, louder. "Evil presences need permission to enter your space." The knocking stopped. He jumped away from the door like his life depended on it.

The knocking was replaced by a grinding sound, like two hard surfaces rubbing against each other. The doorknob turned. He covered his ears, but it was no use; the sound seemed to be welling up from beneath the ground. He had no idea what to do. *If they come in anyway…* What did Rumi say next? He couldn't remember. What should he do?

"I—I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth…"

A desperate prayer came spilling from his lips. The grinding didn't stop.

"…and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord…"

The grinding was getting closer.

"For Th-Thine is the Kingdom, and the p-power and the glory…"

His head felt heavy. He couldn't think straight. The grinding was all there was. He knew praying wouldn't help him now. He knew because he was a doubter. Prayer only worked for the truly faithful. It was just like with *kokkuri-san*—if you didn't believe, nothing would happen.

He could hear laughing now. A sharp, grassy scent assaulted his nostrils.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

What did it want?

The knob slowly turned, and the door opened…

"Oh… Are you all right?"

Aoyama opened his eyes to see Ms. Akino standing in the doorway. She looked worried. Behind her was a girl in a brightly colored dress. She was also staring at him intently.

"I thought I heard chanting coming from in here. Could it be…? Is there really…?"

Ms. Akino had turned pale. She started muttering again that she couldn't stand scary stuff. Whatever Aoyama had experienced just now, it almost definitely qualified as a paranormal phenomenon. Whether it was directly related to Haruko or not was another question. Either way, confirming this to someone as excitable as Ms. Akino wasn't a good idea.

Not for the first time, Aoyama found himself wishing he could be more like Mononobe. He'd felt that way almost constantly since the link between them was formed. Although now that he'd seen kind of the hellish scenery the other man had to endure, that attitude felt more than a little disrespectful. He forced himself to put on a smile.

"Oh, no, this is just a bit of routine work. I do it all the time. Sorry, did you find it disturbing?"

He imitated Toshihiko with a coy tilt of his head. It always looked incredibly charming, but he had no idea if it would have the same effect when he did it.

"No, I'm sorry, I just got a little flustered."

Ms. Akino let her shoulders sag, clearly a bit embarrassed. Apparently, "the look" had worked after all.

"I quite understand; it's a stressful time for you. I wish there was something I could do… For now, may I get started with my interviews?"

"Y-yes. Well then, Yuzuki, would you have a talk with this nice man?"

The girl nodded and sat down on the sofa.

"I'll be waiting just outside, so let me know when you're finished."

The girl visibly exhaled once the teacher was out the door. She stretched out her legs and relaxed.

"Hey, mister, are you mixed-race or something?"

Clearly, she wasn't shy about speaking her mind. Aoyama had met kids at the church who talked that way, too.

"I suppose you could say that. My great-grandfather was Irish."

"Huh, you're like Matty."

"Matty?"

"He's a TikTokker. Haven't you heard of him?"

"I don't think I have…"

After staring at Aoyama a little longer, Yuzuki took a breath and began speaking.

Yuzuki Azuma's Story

Let me start by saying this—I don't believe in ghosts. I got over that baby stuff by the end of my first year here. But the stories about Haruko are true. I've *seen* her. The person I heard the story from was my ex-boyfriend. Once he told me, I broke up with him on the spot. I was so mad—didn't he care if all that scary stuff happened to me?

Anyway, once I heard the story, Haruko appeared in my dreams the very same night. I got into bed, and I thought I'd fallen asleep, but all of a sudden, I was there at a church by a lake.

…Oh, that church is where you live? I didn't know.

Okay, where was I?

Right. I was like, whoa, that story really was true.

"Help me find the boy."

I heard this voice coming from behind me. I turned around and there she was. Haruko. She looked different from how the story made her sound. She'd lost her son because of those bullies, so I kinda felt sorry for her. I thought she'd be some thin, ragged old lady. But that wasn't what she looked like at all.

She *was* slim, but she was tall, too; she seemed like she could be a model. She didn't talk like someone desperately searching for her son, either. She had a pretty face—gaudy makeup, though—but she seemed less sad and more plain mean. I stared at her for a while, then she clicked her tongue and said, "Hurry up and get started."

I wasn't afraid of her because she was a ghost. But she seemed like the kind of grown-up who was scary when she was angry. I did like she said and went into the church. There were rows and rows of long benches inside. People were sitting on them. On every single one of them. I don't know how many people can fit on each one, but they were all totally packed.

At first, I thought she wanted me to see if her son was somewhere in the crowd, but it was pretty obvious he wasn't. They were all grown-ups, and their clothes and height and poses and hairstyles were exactly the same. I think…they were women. I can't really remember, but I *think* they were women. I couldn't see their faces because everyone was hunched over and mumbling something.

I was really afraid of what might happen if they looked up and saw me. I started crawling along on all fours. That was the only way I could think to make sure I stayed hidden. I was too scared to even think about searching for the boy. I tried slipping into the room next to the…altar? Is that what it's called? There were people in there, too. Every room I checked was the same—just tons and tons of people who looked the same. I couldn't even move anymore. I closed my eyes tight and crouched against the wall, and after a while, I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Did you find him?"

All of a sudden, I was outside the church again, and the scary lady from before was glaring at me.

"I'm sorry."

I didn't know what to do or say, so I just kept apologizing.

"Oh, shut up! I *hate* children's voices. Be quiet!"

I clamped my hands over my mouth, so I wouldn't make any sound. After a while, the lady stared at me again.

"You didn't find him, then. Children are so noisy and useless. I wish you'd die already."

She came up to me and grabbed my hair. She forced me to look up until our eyes met. Her makeup was really caked on. I remember thinking she had nice, shiny skin, but it seemed like she had something else on besides foundation to make it look that way.

"I'll be seeing you again."

She threw me to the ground. The next thing I knew, I was back in my bed. I tried telling myself it had all been a dream, but I couldn't get it out of my head. I've never had a dream that felt so real before. It's kind of embarrassing, but I did like the Seven Mysteries story said and told someone else about it. And the next night, nothing happened.

…Sorry, mister, but even looking at your church scares me now.

While she was telling her story, Yuzuki Azuma's cynical way of talking had gradually changed. The memory of what happened had likely shaken her. She looked pale and afraid now.

"Thank you. Your story was very easy to follow."

Aoyama's compliment seemed to help her relax a little.

"Mister, are you an exorcist?"

"No, not me. I'm surprised you know what that is."

"Well, you see them on TV and stuff."

Depictions of exorcists in the media tended to be patterned off the legendary horror movie *The Exorcist*. Really, it was less of a horror

movie and more of a buddy cop–style drama starring two priests. Aoyama was about to bring it up but then remembered there were a lot of graphic and distressing scenes in it, especially for young children.

The movie exaggerated the powers of the Catholic Church, too, and there was some debate over where it was appropriate to use these religious themes as consumable entertainment. What would his grandfather have thought if he'd watched it? He had been a broad-minded person, and Aoyama liked to think he'd have been able to enjoy it for what it was.

He knew it wouldn't do much good, but he made a show of reciting the Lord's Prayer for Yuzuki. She was back to her old self when he finished, so it had been worth it just to help her feel better.

After Yuzuki, the stories he heard from the other kids were more or less the same. They were taken to the Pádraig Aoba Church in their dreams, where a scary lady told them to help her find "the boy." The church was filled with identical people, probably women, all looking at the floor, all mumbling. When the children were unable to find Haruko's son, she criticized them harshly and left, saying she would "see them again." So many of them said they found the church scary and never wanted to go there again that Aoyama felt like he should be suing Haruko for disrupting his business.

Finally, it was time for Miki herself. She was the one who had started spreading this story, so he had a lot of questions for her. Aoyama would have to stay calm and not make it seem like he was accusing her of anything. He stretched out and tried to center himself. However, when the appointed time arrived, there was no sign of Miki. Hoping that the knocking wasn't about to start up again, Aoyama opened the door and stepped into the hallway.

"How strange, it's long past the time we agreed on. Miki's a… unique child, but not the type to break a promise," said Ms. Akino.

He waited another ten minutes with Ms. Akino. There was still no sign of Miki. They even tried putting out an announcement on the PA system, but it didn't do any good.

"I guess that's a no go."

"It seems that way. I really am sorry. What do you want to do?"

Ms. Akino was hinting none too subtly that she would prefer if Aoyama left. He couldn't blame her. Regardless of his tenuous connection with the school, they were doing him a favor letting him talk to the kids. It wasn't fair to expect the teachers to go along with it any more than common courtesy demanded.

"Something must have come up. I heard plenty from the others, so it shouldn't be a problem. Ms. Akino, thank you so much for putting aside this time for me. Tell the kids that I'm grateful as well."

He gave a low bow, which Ms. Akino hurried to mirror.

Truth be told, Miki was the one he'd wanted to talk to most. But there wasn't anything he could do about it now. If he insisted on coming back another day, that would only create more work for the school. And considering Nanaka's situation, waiting too long wasn't really an option. It would be more efficient to just go home with the information he'd gathered today and see if it could aid the investigation in any way.

Right as he was leaving the school grounds, somebody grabbed his arm. The memory of the knocking on the reception room door made him freeze up. But when he turned around, he saw Yuzuki Azuma, looking out of breath.

"Mister, hold on a minute."

"Yuzuki? What's the problem?"

The girl took a minute to catch her breath.

"You wanted to talk to Miki, right?"

"Huh?"

Yuzuki smiled.

"Miki tried to run, but the rest of us were too fast for 'em."

Pulling on Aoyama's arm, she led him away in the opposite direction to the train station. After five minutes, they arrived at a park with a distinctive dome-shaped piece of play equipment. Some five or six elementary school kids were standing around it, blocking the way out.

"Hey, guys, I brought him."

Yuzuki called out to the others, but they didn't seem to notice. Their faces were all flushed with excitement. The faint sound of sobbing could be heard inside the dome.

"Crying won't do you any good! You're not the victim here!"

"Yeah! You've caused everyone a lot of trouble!"

"You made Yuki cry, too! Apologize!"

He wasn't the one being attacked, but Aoyama felt rather uncomfortable. These kids had probably ganged up on Miki for spreading those harmful stories. He could understand why they'd want to do that, but hounding the poor girl to the point of making her cry was going too far.

"Okay, everyone, let's all just calm down."

Aoyama stepped forward, causing the kids to swivel around to face him. Some, he'd spoken to earlier, while others were new faces.

"I just want to hear what she has to say, all right?"

The kids didn't look too happy.

"But, mister, Miki is…"

"Even if she did something bad, doing this will make her sad and afraid. That will make it hard for her to apologize properly."

"You're too soft, mister," Yuzuki said with an exasperated sigh. "C'mon, everyone, let's go."

At her prompting, the kids reluctantly began to leave. Aoyama thanked Yuzuki for the help, and she replied that she'd always be there to help out a handsome man. He smiled wryly. If there was a girl with such great leadership qualities keeping the kids in line, the teachers at this school probably had it easy. He turned around to face the jungle gym. He could still hear the light sobbing.

"They're gone now."

He called, but no one answered. He crouched down to look through one of the holes leading into the dome. The first thing he saw was a head of hair that was such a light shade of blond, it was almost pink. A T-shirt so colorful that it hurt his eyes and a pair of denim shorts soon came into focus, too. Quite the fashion

statement. Had kids dressed that flashily when Aoyama was that age? He crawled in and crouched down next to the child.

"I'm not mad at you. I just want to talk."

Still sobbing, Miki looked up at him. Aoyama stared for longer than he meant to. Thick eyebrows. Narrow eyes with heavy eyeliner. A solid-looking nose and pair of lips. Miki wasn't a girl with boyish features. Rather…

"I bet you think it's weird for a boy to dress like this, don't you?"

"N-no, not at all…"

He responded a little too quickly. In all honesty, he *was* surprised. Not because this Miki boy was wearing feminine clothes. It was the fact that he *was* a boy that had thrown him. Now that he thought about it, Nanaka had never referred to Miki as "she." He'd just assumed Nanaka would be friends with other girls. Ms. Akino hadn't used any gendered pronouns when talking about him, either. Aoyama felt like he'd fallen for some kind of misdirection in a mystery novel.

"Are you, uh…agender? Nonbinary?"

"I don't like labels," Miki said dismissively. "I just wear the clothes I like, that's all."

"Right. Sorry."

Now that Aoyama thought about it, it probably wasn't very pleasant for someone who barely knew you to start making assumptions and try to categorize you. Aoyama's apology only seemed to make Miki more uncomfortable, though.

"No, I'm sorry. I should be thanking you for getting those girls off my back."

"That must have be tough for you. I used to get teased when I was your age, too. I know how it feels to have people ganging up on you."

"That's a lie. No way you got teased with a face like that."

Miki wiped away his tears. It smudged his eyeliner, making it look like he had dark bags under his eyes.

"If I had a face like yours, I'd be able to get away with wearing more. You know, even skirts and stuff."

People may have described Aoyama as cute, but he doubted he could "get away with" wearing a skirt. He was about to make an offhand comment about what people would think of him if he tried but stopped himself just in time. It wouldn't have been very sensitive to treat gender nonconformity like a joke.

"Lots of people think this stuff doesn't look good on me, but I'm not gonna stop wearing it."

Seeing Miki speak so resolutely, despite the tears in his eyes, gave Aoyama a newfound respect for the boy. The world had become a more accepting place since his own childhood, but there were probably still people out there who would give kids like Miki a hard time. Even Aoyama found it hard not to view him as something special or unusual. That determination to stay true to himself would serve the boy well in the future.

"I'm…sorry for running away," Miki muttered after a few more moments of silence.

For a moment, Aoyama wasn't sure what he meant. Then he remembered their appointment to meet at the school.

"It's all right. I'm the one who insisted everyone come talk to me."

Miki's expression finally softened a little. He had a cute, childlike smile. It made Aoyama want to smile, too. The boy took a deep breath, as if strengthening his resolve, and began to speak.

"So, uh, the reason I told everyone the rumors… The story about Haruko. It's because I was afraid."

"Afraid?"

Miki nodded.

"Afraid of Haruko."

"So you met her before all this started?"

"Yeah."

Miki stared off into the distance.

"The story about Haruko is almost completely fake. I made it up. I took most of the ideas from this manga called *Hell Teacher: Jigoku*

Sensei Nube, which I found in my sister's room."

"Why would you do something like that?"

"Because I was afraid of Haruko."

They were going around in circles. Aoyama looked over at Miki—his mouth was now firmly closed.

"Well… If it's made-up, can't you just choose not to believe in it?"

"Of course I can't. Not when she's actually started showing up in everyone's dreams now."

Aoyama nodded. He couldn't argue with that.

"The places she shows up and her leaving you alone if you tell someone else the story is all true. The part I made up was who Haruko is and where she came from. She's not looking for her son or anything like that."

Miki had started trembling. It was like he was struggling to get each word out.

"She told *me* that she'd take me to hell unless I told everyone about her."

He pressed his hands together to try and keep himself still. It felt like the temperature inside the jungle gym had suddenly dropped. No, it wasn't Aoyama's imagination. It really had gotten colder. It had been so bright outside a moment ago, and now it was dark. But why? It was the middle of summer and nowhere near late enough for the sun to have set. Just then, he heard the grinding. The same unnerving noise he'd heard in the reception room.

"Sh-she's here. It's Haruko…!"

Miki sprang up and went to crawl out of the dome. Aoyama pulled him back and wrapped his arms around him.

"I-it's okay."

The grinding was louder now, closer, like it was right under their noses.

"Don't go out there."

Krsh, krsh, krsh… Krsh, krsh, krsh…

He couldn't see what was going on outside. A thousand worst-case scenarios filled his head. Had Haruko's influence fallen over the

jungle gym like a cloak, letting her look in at them? Miki was too scared to speak now, clinging to Aoyama's shirt so tightly, he could have torn it off.

"She can't come in unless we let her."

"Yes, I can." A voice came from outside. "Oh, yes, I can…"

Despite there being no light, a shadow fell across the ground. The shape was clear and distinct—the inverted outline of a woman's head.

"I can get in… I can get in… I can get in…"

Aoyama reached out and touched the ground. The dirt was loose beneath his fingers.

If she comes in anyway…

"I can get in."

There were a total of six holes leading out of the dome. Aoyama started drawing an X in the dirt in front of each of them.

"I can get in I can get in I can get in…"

One, two, three, four, five…

The grinding noise didn't stop. He felt like it was going to drive him crazy. He reached for the final hole. Miki's weight felt heavy against him. How could someone be sweating so much and still feel so cold?

"I can get in."

Before he could finish drawing the final X, Aoyama's eyes met Haruko's. She was a tall woman with long black hair. He thought at first that her jaw was dislocated. But that wasn't the case. She actually didn't have a jaw. Not a human one anyway. But she was somehow still making that noise that sounded like teeth grinding against each other. That *krsh, krsh, krsh* was coming from her mouth.

She was laughing. Aoyama didn't know why he knew that, but he did. She had a broad grin on her face and seemed to be thoroughly enjoying every minute of this.

"I can get—"

The moment Aoyama finished the final X, Haruko disappeared. He could hear children laughing. Peeking his head outside the dome, he felt the sun on his face. Other children were playing in the park. Fatigue washed over him, and he collapsed to the ground. Getting his clothes dirty was the least of his worries at this point.

"Looks like we made it through that okay."

Miki didn't reply. Aoyama swiveled around, still on the ground, to look at the boy's face.

"It's not okay."

Miki's lips had turned blue. His eyes were wide-open, unblinking, and he was pointing at something behind Aoyama. Beneath a large clock outside, a woman was waving to them. A grin spread across her face, and then she was gone.

3

Toshihiko would never have answered a call from an unknown number if he hadn't had a fever coming on. He didn't remember what happened after he saw the woman at the police station. He'd gotten home somehow, but he didn't recall anything about the journey. It wasn't cold out, but his whole body was shivering. It wasn't hot, either, but he was sweating out of his every pore.

He'd asked his mother to call in sick for him. He'd vetoed her request to call him an ambulance, though. This wasn't something that going to a hospital would fix. Ishigami's talisman really had been protecting him, and now it was gone. He crawled into bed and lay there shivering, desperately clutching his rosary. It barely did anything besides warming his hands a little.

He could hear the grinding inside his head. It might have just been his imagination, but it still kept him from sleeping. He turned the TV on and looked at the current time displayed in the top right of the screen. All he could do now was lie there and stare at it, watching the minutes tick by. It was no wonder he wasn't thinking straight when the phone rang.

In Toshihiko's experience, calls from unknown numbers were usually from people who'd formed a one-sided attachment to him

and had gotten his number without him knowing. Hence why he usually didn't answer them. But the vibrating phone felt like it was rattling around in his already aching head. He just wanted it to stop, so he swiped to answer the call before he knew what he was doing.

"This is Kamemura from the Aoba Police Station. Is this Toshihiko Katayama?"

Toshihiko sprang up suddenly, then swayed unsteadily on his feet and collapsed right back into bed.

"Is everything okay…?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine!"

Kamemura sounded so much nicer over the phone than he did in person.

"I've had confirmation on the matter you asked me to look into."

"What matter…?"

"You know, the woman… The one you said was the culprit."

The image of that woman laughing uproariously rose up in his memory. He let out a little involuntary groan.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine…"

"You don't sound fine. Are you okay to meet right now? Or do you have something else to do?"

Toshihiko focused what energy he had and managed to sit up. His vision was blurry, and he could still hear the grinding.

"Yeah, I can meet you."

Once he finally spoke, he began to feel like he might get through it after all.

"Should I come to the police station? It might take me a while to get there."

"Actually, I had somewhere else in mind. I'll tell you the address, so can you meet me there?"

"Okay…"

Toshihiko made a note of the meeting place. His writing was so sloppy that he could barely decipher what it said himself. Kamemura hung up immediately afterward. So much for him being nicer than

usual. But it was a miracle he'd even looked into things this far. From Kamemura's point of view, the imaging data and the idea that it showed the culprit in this case was dubious at best.

Still holding tight to his rosary, Toshihiko headed to the address. Perhaps Kamemura had chosen the location out of consideration for him, for it was much closer to Toshihiko's home than the police station. He could have walked there in ten minutes, but because of the way he was dragging his tired, lethargic body along, it took twice that amount of time.

It was an office building with the first five floors dedicated to rental space. Kamemura had told him to go to the fourth floor. Thankfully, he hadn't felt the clingy gaze on him on the way over. When he reached the fourth floor, Kamemura appeared and took his arm, as if he'd been hovering around, waiting for Toshihiko to arrive.

"In here."

He pulled Toshihiko into a little room on the left side of the hallway, where the two of them sat down on opposite sides of a small table. Toshihiko had never been in an interrogation room, but he imagined this might be what they were like. Kamemura was silent for a while, then finally spoke.

"You're looking a little pale."

"I'm fine. It's nothing to—"

"Still beautiful, though," Kamemura continued without letting him finish. It didn't sound like the detective was trying to tease or insult him. His voice was calm and clearheaded.

"Color me surprised. Even you say stuff like that sometimes," said Toshihiko.

Kamemura held his gaze, his eyes steady.

"'Even me,' huh? Truth is, I'm the type to say that kind of stuff more than anyone."

"What do you mean?"

"I know I've been pretty harsh toward you."

"Well…"

It was true. He'd basically told Toshihiko it was his own fault that he was being stalked. He'd acted like the whole case was just an annoyance and nothing else.

"I'm actually really shallow. Only judge people by their looks. I like pretty people and get the urge to treat them better than anyone else."

"I…see?"

Toshihiko was eager to move on to the main point of their meeting, but he found his interest piqued in spite of himself.

"I *know* I'm that kind of person, so I get scared. Of beautiful people, I mean. Of what I might do just because I like the look of them."

Kamemura suddenly lowered his head. His forehead actually touched the white table between them, making a dull *thunk*. The hair on the top of his head was thinning.

"I'm sorry. I was a jerk to you all because of my personal hang-ups," said Kamemura.

"It's okay… I'll admit I was annoyed at the time. But you followed up on this weird lead I gave you… I'm guessing you did that part as a personal favor? That's why you asked to meet here instead of at the station."

Kamemura took another long look at Toshihiko's face and sighed.

"I know you were doing it deliberately before, but I guess it's also just a subconscious thing with you. You probably haven't noticed, but each and every little movement you make is exquisite. It's like you know exactly what to do and how to do it to show off your looks and get people to do exactly what you want."

"I don't…"

Kamemura gave a self-deprecating laugh.

"I know, I know. You don't realize you're doing it. That's just the kind of person you are. I've known women like that, too."

He took a file folder out of his bag and opened it. The first page had an A4-size photograph on it. A photograph of *the woman*. Had Kamemura printed out the data Miyoshi had put together? No… She

looked younger here than she did in the 3D model. Her makeup was rather distinctive, and she had a flashy sense of style. Could this be…?

"She'd been famous for her talent and beauty ever since she was little. She might not be on your level, but she was a real looker. Unusually tall for a Japanese woman, too. Those long, slender arms and legs… She was a ballerina, and a good one at that. Went to study in Russia when she was young. But she never really made it over there. She met a Japanese businessman while abroad, married him, and moved back to Japan."

"Hold on a minute, this is all happening so fast. Who are you talking about?"

"Haruko Kadowaki. The lady in the photo. She's probably a generation too old for you to know about, but she was pretty famous back in the day. She was on TV and everything. A local girl, on top of that. Even I was a fan."

Haruko Kadowaki. Like Haruko from the story? This couldn't be a coincidence. The woman in the photo must be the same person who'd come up in the elementary school's Seven Mysteries story. Toshihiko's lip trembled. He couldn't even say something random to fill the silence.

"She had a son, and for a while, the three of them lived happily together, but then she fell into her bad habit."

"Bad…habit?"

"Are you sure you're all right? I can take you to a hospital if you're not feeling up to this."

Kamemura offered him a bottle of tea, and Toshihiko took a swig of it.

"I'll be okay… Please, continue."

"If you're sure. You can probably imagine what comes next, but her 'bad habit' was that she liked to play around with other men. Even if she didn't actively flirt or entice them, people got drawn to someone as pretty as her no matter what she did. I'm sure you know what's that like."

For a split second, Toshihiko thought of Miyoshi. Kamemura ignored his reaction and continued: "She was a mature-looking beauty, you know? Even when she was in elementary school, she already had several admirers. I don't know how it was for her in Russia, but I doubt getting married and having a kid did much to change her. Her husband never confronted her about her infidelity. He was probably too infatuated with her to say anything.

"Haruko, on the other hand, started finding fault with every little thing he did. I've been doing this job a long time, and if there's one thing I've learned, it's that people who cheat—both men and women—always assume everyone is just as bad as them. They convince themselves their partners must be cheating, that they've already betrayed them, and won't let it go. That's how it was with her.

"She took their son and came back here, to where her family home was. Around that time, she started aging pretty badly. It was like the way she'd been living had finally caught up with her."

A tapping noise echoed throughout the room. Kamemura was drumming his fingers on the table. His brow was deeply furrowed. The depth of those lines seemed to hint at the kind of stressful life the police officer had led.

"Mr. Katayama… Have you ever thought about what you would do if you lost your good looks?"

"Not really. Not at all, in fact."

"Is that so? You seriously are a special one."

Kamemura's fingertips were turning white. He pressed down hard on the photo of Haruko Kadowaki.

"For most of us, we know we're going to get old someday, so it's not a huge deal when it does happen. But *really* pretty people find it hard to accept. Our girl Haruko started piling on the makeup and dancing outdoors like a crazy person. She may have been out of practice, but she was nonetheless a pro. Watching her at it was still kind of spellbinding. Creepy, too, in a way. Eventually, there wasn't a man left who was good enough for her…"

"Detective Kamemura?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing. Anyway, I never had the courage to talk to her myself. All I could do was admire her from afar. People used to call her the Spring Ephemeral. I was actually the one who came up with that nickname."

Kamemura's face twisted with regret, his voice too quiet to make out. He looked like he might start crying at the slightest provocation. Toshihiko could imagine what he was going through. He must have felt so powerless to see this woman he'd loved since childhood go so very far off the rails.

"Turns out that nickname wasn't as nice as it seemed at first. Almost feels like I jinxed her. There's a flower called the spring ephemeral, see? It has a really short lifespan—blooms in spring, then withers and dies before the season's out. I think Haruko Kadowaki's life ended up following that pattern, too."

He slowly turned the pages in the file until a newspaper clipping came out.

"And here we have the article reporting the end of the Spring Ephemeral."

The cold, robotic ticking of the clock on the plain white walls was the only sound in the room.

"So tell me, Mr. Katayama. Why are you accusing a dead woman of being behind all this?"

4

The smiling woman beneath the pillar clock disappeared immediately. But even when she did, Aoyama and Miki couldn't bring themselves to leave the dome. They must have looked pretty strange, sitting there, not doing anything with looks of sheer terror on their faces. But they couldn't let their guard down until they were sure she wasn't going to reappear.

"What did you do just now, mister? Did drawing those crosses stop her from coming in?"

Miki spoke as if the memory had come back to him right then.

When Haruko had been on the verge of entering the dome, Aoyama had finally remembered Rumi's advice.

"No matter what they are, evil presences need permission to enter your space. The most famous example is probably vampires. There are also some Christian demonology texts that say demons can only enter places they've been invited into."

Rumi had said this while twirling a red pen around in one hand.

Of course, he remembered now.

They'd been in the house of a man who claimed the ghost of a woman was visiting him every night, even with the door locked. At first, she had only entered as far as the shoe rack, but night after night, she penetrated deeper into the client's home, until his tiny attic room was the only place he was safe. The man had gone to stay with a friend while Rumi and Aoyama investigated the house.

"Therefore, all we need to do is visibly forbid them from entering. We need to show this spirit that she's not permitted, not welcome, not wanted here."

Rumi had placed a pile of salt by the front door and pasted talismans onto the doors and windows. Aoyama chatted with her as she worked, getting other things done around the house, and the next thing they knew, night had fallen. According to the client, the woman always appeared around eight o'clock and stayed until dawn. It was long past eight then.

"Wow, those talismans really do the trick, huh?"

"Of course. They come all the way from Ise, after all."

Rumi puffed out her chest, acting like she was the one who'd made them. After killing some more time, the clock had ticked around to two in the morning. At that point, they heard a faint scratching sound, like tiny stones being thrown against the window. Rumi sighed gently.

"They *are* effective, but still."

Clink, clink.

"Is that noise…?"

"Yes. She's here."

Next, a loud *slam* came from the front door.

"Aoyama, do you remember what I told you this afternoon?"

"You mean how evil spirits need permission to come in? We're doing that now?"

Thud, thud, thud… Someone was knocking on the door, hard.

"Yes, now. There are times when they find a way in even when they haven't been invited."

The noise was getting more and more intense, a faint sorrowful wailing mixed in with the knocking.

"*Stay away. Get out. You're not welcome here.* If you make that clear, and they come in anyway…"

Something was splintering now. The door had had been flung wide-open, practically kicked in.

"…you do this."

Rumi took the cap off the red pen and drew a large X on Aoyama's forehead.

There was a sound like wet cloth being dragged across the floor. The ghost woman was crawling. She wore a filthy brown raincoat covered in mud. Her hair was dripping wet, and she drenched the ground as she crawled along. She slowly raised her head…

She had no nose. The middle of her face had been hollowed out. Aoyama yelped in fear and surprise.

"It's all right," Rumi assured him.

The woman must have heard Rumi, because she turned in her direction. Rumi held up one hand and made a gesture like she was throwing a stone. The woman disappeared. They waited a while, but nothing else happened. The room returned to its former quiet state.

"Well, time for us to leave," Rumi said, dusting off her hands.

"Wh-what did you do?"

"It's called *ayatsuko*."

She extended a pointer finger on each hand and formed a cross shape with them.

"In some regions, there's a custom to paint an X on a baby's forehead the first time it leaves the house. Like the *hatsumode* shrine visit the rest of the country practices, it's a way of warding off evil. The mark's been found in ruins as old as the Koujindani Site."

"The Koujindani Site?"

"It's an archaeological site in Hikawa, Izumo, discovered near the end of the Showa era. A great number of bronze swords and other artifacts were excavated there. Experts still haven't been able to determine exactly when they were buried, but almost all of them had an X mark engraved into them."

Rumi peeled one of the talismans off the window as she went on.

"In other words, this mark, this *ayatsuko*, is a way of showing that something—or someone—belongs to the gods. It makes things sacred or at least places them under sacred protection. That's how I choose to interpret it anyway."

Aoyama considered this for a moment.

"So you protected me by showing that I belong to the gods. But which gods are we talking about? The one enshrined at Ise Shrine? I'm technically a Christian…"

"That doesn't really matter, does it?" Rumi gave a gentle smile. "There aren't many spirits foolish enough to go against the will of *any* god."

In the heat of the moment, Aoyama had suddenly remembered that incident and marked the entrances to the jungle gym with *ayatsuko* crosses. It had all worked out in the end, it seemed. He'd been able to protect both himself and Miki. But how exactly had he, someone with no real power and no faith in Japan's native gods, been worthy enough to invoke their protection?

Perhaps it was simply a matter of will. The power to manifest things if you believed in them enough. Mononobe, Rumi, and the young man who had brainwashed Emi all had that power. Those three were extreme examples with other abilities, too, but normal people could probably do something similar. The origin of the belief

that evil couldn't enter without permission might even be rooted in that concept.

"What I did was…kind of like a lucky charm. It just happened to work out."

"Oh, okay."

Miki seemed to open his heart a little and told Aoyama about how he'd met Haruko—or rather, a man possessed by Haruko.

"My sister is a nail technician, and she lets me watch her at work sometimes after school. That day, she was going to stay over at her boyfriend's, so I had to walk home on my own. I felt a tap on my shoulder, and when I turned around, there was this lady standing there. Except it wasn't a lady. I could tell right away. She had this rough, low voice, and, well…her outfit was all wrong. A trans lady would've taken more care with how she looked. This was just a man who'd thrown on some women's clothes at random. No one with that kind of figure would actually choose to wear an I-line dress."

Aoyama felt like Miki was suddenly speaking a different language. He asked the boy to explain some of those terms.

"An I-line dress is shaped like a letter *I*—very sleek, very straight. On men, it tends to make their shoulders and chest look too big. It makes their masculinity more obvious. That's the kind of information you can find online really easily, so this guy can't have done his homework. But it would've been okay if that was all this was. It's hard to explain, but…it was like something was making him think he was a woman."

"You sure it wasn't some kind of fetish thing?"

Miki shook his head.

"No. I mean, I did wonder, and I already had my finger on my personal alarm. But I couldn't move. I was too scared."

The boy began to shrink into himself.

"There was this…grinding sound. And something was standing behind the man. Something bad. I couldn't run. All I could do was back away into the shadow of a building."

Still stumbling over his words sometimes, Miki recounted the full story he'd heard from the stranger. A story full of pain and sorrow.

"The reason I made up the Haruko story and spread it around wasn't just because I was frightened of her."

He turned and looked into Aoyama's eyes.

"I felt sorry for that guy, too."

"Felt…sorry for him?"

Miki hugged his knees, huddling in even further.

"He said a lot of nasty things to me, but the whole time he was doing it, he looked so sad, like he was about to cry. I think… I think he's never really known what it's like to be happy. He's been possessed by Haruko this whole time, and…I think that must have been really hard on him."

Aoyama couldn't help himself. He reached over and gave Miki a big hug.

"You're a very kind boy."

"Knock it off, mister. I'm not that nice. Besides, you're gonna give me the wrong idea."

Aoyama released the boy, who smiled back at him, showing shining white teeth. Miki stood up, dusting the sand off his bottom from where he'd been sitting so long. Aoyama also got to his feet (though he had to crouch inside the dome) and climbed into the open. Outside, the weather was clear. The sun had begun to set, and the sky was painted in blue-and-yellow hues as night bled into day.

"Hey, mister?" Miki said, stretching out. "I probably don't have any right to ask this, but… Do something for him, will you?"

"Of course."

He had no grounds for believing it, but Aoyama felt that Rumi would be able to handle it. And he'd help her to achieve that end in any way he could. Miki's story had jogged something loose in his mind. The ballerina Haruko Kadowaki. This was the first time he'd heard her name, but he did in fact know of her. It was a long time

ago now, back when his grandfather was still alive and running the church. He'd made an announcement during services one day.

"One of our sisters has departed for heaven."

"Does that mean somebody died?" Aoyama had asked his mother.

"Yes. She had a son about your age, Kouki."

His grandfather had bid them to pray, and Aoyama had dutifully put his hands together. A boy his own age had just lost his mother. He tried to think about how scary that must be and what he would do if his mother was suddenly taken from him.

They'd been talking about Haruko Kadowaki. Her son had to be the one who'd come across Miki and forced him to spread the rumors. Unfortunately, since her son and Aoyama had been in different school years, he didn't remember much about him. On his way back to the Sasaki Agency office, he called his father.

"Hello, Dad?"

At this time of day, his father probably didn't have a lot of pressing jobs.

"Sorry to bother you, but can you look into our register of congregants? Didn't a lady called Haruko Kadowaki go to our church at one time? She passed away back when I was in elementary school."

His father was surprised but agreed to help.

"It's been a while since I've heard that name. You might not know this, but she was quite the celebrity back then. It's a pity she died so young… Why the sudden interest in her?"

"I already knew she'd passed away… I'm sorry, it's for a job with the agency. I need some information about her."

His father had never been too happy about Aoyama working with Rumi. No doubt he'd have preferred his son concentrate on taking over the family business. But he also seemed to think that young people who had jobs that didn't require formal study or training were really only doing it for fun. Aoyama's grandfather had held a similar attitude. The phone speaker was silent for a while.

"Please, Dad. I promise I'm not going to use it for anything weird. Haruko Kadowaki had a son, right? Can you tell me his name? I think he might be involved in the case I'm working."

His father sighed before replying:

"All right. But you'd better give me a proper explanation for all this once this is over. I'll go look it up now and text you back."

"Thank you. And I *will* explain everything, I promise."

His father's text arrived right as he was reaching the office.

Haruko Sayama—b. 05/10/1972

Yuuki Sayama—b. 11/15/1997

Fifteen years ago, Haruko and her son had lived on the third floor of the Aoba Grande, an apartment building a short walk from the church. *Sayama* must have been Haruko's married name. Yuuki. Mommy's Little Yuki. The names were so similar. This had to be it.

Maybe, for once, Aoyama was going to be useful after all. It was a good feeling. Usually, all he did was serve drinks to their clients and make sure Rumi took care of herself, neither of which were particularly relevant to the job. Rumi handled all the supernatural research and fieldwork herself. She always said Aoyama was a great help to her, but he wasn't so sure.

He thought again about what Mononobe had said. "That woman is deceiving you." He had a feeling this was what the young shaman meant. Rumi probably only kept a useless assistant like him around out of pity. She was a strange person but also a good person. She didn't have it in her to neglect or reject someone who trailed after her like a puppy. Anything nice she said about him was likely a lie to make him feel better.

Just because Rumi thought of him as useless, that didn't mean he was going to give up. He simply had to *become* useful and make her change her mind about him. Even if her kind words were lies, even if the tasks she gave him were only busywork, he wouldn't let it get him down. There was no deep reason for this. Ever since Rumi had saved his life, Aoyama had wanted to be by her side, always. That was enough.

5

—O sacred Head, now wounded…—

My skin is cold. I open my eyes.

—With thorns, Thine only crown…—

A hymn is playing. I'm sitting on a hard bench, a pew. I must be in a church. Yes, it's Pádraig Aoba.

—Be Thou my consolation, my shield when I must die…—

Something's wrong. I don't remember attending this service. I look around. The pews are packed tight with people. My thighs are touching the thighs of the women on either side of me. This isn't right. The hymn keeps playing, but no one is singing.

—Mine eyes shall then behold Thee…—

A man in a black gown stands at the altar, his back to us. He has chestnut-brown hair. Aoyama?

"Aoyama."

I call to him, but he doesn't reply. He just spreads out his arms.

"Aoyama!"

I call again, a little louder this time. *Clap.* He brings his hands together.

"Silence."

That's not Aoyama's voice. It's distorted like a call with bad reception, making it grate. I instinctively cover my ears. Then I notice something else.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

The lady next to me is mumbling something over and over again, almost too quiet for anyone to hear.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

No, not just her. It's all of them. Every person in the packed pews that populate this church, all these women the same height and build, they're all desperately repeating those same words. Their mouths are dry. I'm the only one who's different. Without warning, the man in the black robe who's not Aoyama disappears.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

My head is starting to feel fuzzy. I remember now. The story Nanaka Yokozawa told me about the Haruko apparition. The first night, she takes you to the Pádraig Aoba Church. That's where I am. She must be in my dreams now. But I never went to Aoba South Elementary. I haven't been an elementary school kid in over twenty years. So why am I having this dream?

Haruko's tale was put together a little too well. It's not an account of actual events; I knew it was a made-up story right from the start. Even so, its influence has spread remarkably quickly, and now it can affect someone with no connection to the school, like me. According to the story, Haruko should be appearing and telling me to help her find "the boy," but there's no sign of her anywhere. Now the man in black is gone, and I'm alone with these rows of identical women and their disturbing voices.

I stand up. I know I have to find Haruko one way or another. But my head hurts; it feels like it's going to split apart.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

Knock it off. Do you have to keep saying that?

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

You realize apologizing is meaningless, don't you?

"I'm sorry—"

Mothers think they can do whatever they want with their kids. Apologizing won't fix it. What's there to apologize for? Nothing. It's pointless. If she's going to criticize me for even being born, whether I apologize or not won't change anything. Why are these women so hell-bent on apologizing? I want them to stop.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

I'm having trouble breathing. Just like in the dirty apartment that rattled whenever trains passed by, and the even dirtier closet inside it. The palace that I created for myself. I waited. I waited for so, so

long for my mother to open that door. I grasp my left wrist. There's no bracelet there. Of course, I gave it to Nanaka. My precious, precious bracelet.

The woman I now call my mother made that bracelet for me. The two of us aren't related by blood. My birth parents were complete garbage and have long since disappeared from this world. I met my mom at a kind of foster parent–child mixer set up by the Nozomi Center, the orphanage I was sent to after my parents died.

At the time, I didn't understand the kindness that the people from the hospital or the orphanage tried to show me. I was just a piece of garbage, like my parents. I thought my powers meant I could do whatever I wanted. I was selfish and violent, like a wild monkey.

Even when the event began, I was placed in a different room from the other children. I didn't mind; it was all the same to me. It wasn't like anyone would want to adopt me. Not this time or any other time. The people who wanted to become foster parents didn't get to choose the children they fostered. The orphanage would carefully assess their suitability based on things like income, gender, and home environment.

But it wasn't just the potential parents they vetted. It was the children, too. Sometimes, children who have suffered abuse have psychological wounds that haven't quite healed yet. Kids like that can end up acting out and causing trouble for everyone. It's not their fault, really. Well, with me, it was.

I was different back then. Even if my parents hadn't been such garbage, I probably still would have turned out like trash myself. I was ugly and ill-tempered and threw tantrums and broke things and hurt people with my strange powers. It was clear for everyone to see that I was totally unsuitable for foster care.

"What are you doing in here?"

My first impression of the woman who was to become my mother was that she was some fussy fat lady. Like me, she couldn't have been called attractive by any stretch of the imagination. She was wearing girly clothes and an eminently kind smile. Think of the kind

of cute chef lady you see on the packaging of premade stew, and you get an idea of the vibe she gave off. It seriously annoyed me. I ignored her.

"Don't you want to play with your friends?"

"They're not my friends."

I *wanted* them to be my friends. They were all really good kids. They never picked on me; they simply let me be. They were probably playing games with the potential foster parents who were visiting right now. But that had nothing to do with me.

"Why don't *you* go back to them, lady? Just leave me alone."

I spoke without taking my eyes off the floor. Then I focused my power and made the clock on the wall fall down. It was made of plastic, so it didn't make a loud noise, but the front cracked, and the hour hand went flying to a far corner of the room. I'd been able to do that much since I was little. This was how I distanced myself from anyone who tried to treat me kindly.

"Get out."

No matter how kind a person might be, if they were dealing with someone fundamentally incompatible with such kindness, they were better off staying away.

"Next time, I'm aiming for your head."

I looked up, but I didn't see her face pale and twisted with fear like I expected.

"You like 'The Little Mermaid,' don't you?"

Her gentle smile hadn't faltered at all.

"I do, too. But it's quite sad. She turns into sea foam at the end."

I couldn't say a word. I just stood there, swaying unsteadily on my feet. This woman had seen right through me.

Until a short while ago, my palace had been ruled by a being I referred to as the Little Mermaid. When I was very little, my birth mother had bought me a picture book about a mermaid on a whim. I treasured it and read it over and over again. I thought about the Little Mermaid over and over again, and one day, she actually

appeared. Inside the closet where I spent the better part of my days, I built a palace for her out of rotting meat and old flyers.

When my birth parents died, I thought it was because the kindly Little Mermaid had granted my wish and gotten rid of them for me. But all that had just been in my head. I'd killed my parents myself with my power. I'd never talked to anyone about it. Their deaths had been ruled an accident. I'd been present at the scene, but naturally, people only viewed me as a victim of their abuse who happened to escape harm this time.

Why was this woman bringing up the Little Mermaid? How did she know?

"Shut up."

I started putting pressure on a wooden chair. The legs buckled and flew off.

"It wasn't your fault."

She took a step closer to me.

"It wasn't your fault the rabbit died. Or Kanae. You didn't do it on purpose. It wasn't your fault."

"Shut up!"

Kanae. Kanae Hashiguchi. The elementary school girl who'd bullied me. She was a terrible child who'd cut off the ears of one of the school rabbits and tried to feed them to me. I'd said I didn't need her and wished for her to disappear. A signboard came flying out of nowhere, impaling her through the torso. I killed her just like I killed my parents. Once again, I was viewed as nothing but a victim to be pitied. Nobody said that, but they didn't need to. It was obvious they believed it.

After I killed Hashiguchi, I came to believe my power was absolute. I had the means to do whatever I wanted to other people, and the world was full of human scum like my parents and Hashiguchi. Why shouldn't I kill them? Yes, I should kill them. At the orphanage, I lorded over everything with a kind of righteous omnipotence.

But this lady was different. She wasn't trash like the others. No piece of trash could be this kind. I still wanted her to disappear, though. Having someone see through to a part of me that not even I understood was too much for me to handle. Responding to my feelings, the chairs, desks, wooden boards, every object in the room began flying around. I could hear the dull impact as several of them crashed into her. Somehow, the woman found the strength to smile through the pain and walked toward me, one step at a time, until she was right in front of me.

"Don't be afraid."

She took my left hand in hers.

"Let me go."

A folding chair hit her in the head. She let out a low groan. Blood started to trickle down her head.

"No. I won't." She flatly refused. "I just want you to feel safe."

"I don't *need* safety!"

Her hand was so warm, I wanted to cry. I didn't want to accept the warmth that was flowing into me. It wasn't something that someone like me needed or deserved. I focused my power on her hand.

"And I don't need *you*!"

There was a muffled sound, and the next thing I knew, the woman's arm had bent back at an unnatural angle.

"I-it's okay… Look, everything's fine…"

She had tears in her eyes, and her voice was strained, but she still didn't let her smile falter.

"*Nothing* is fine!" I was feeling even more scared now. "Y-your arm is broken! It's bent the wrong way… How can you say *any* of this is fine?!"

She held up her unbroken arm and took my hand again.

"Because I'm *alive*. You said you didn't need me, but I'm still here. You're not the kind of girl who would kill people who've done nothing wrong. It wasn't your fault."

I didn't have the words to respond. Fear and joy and relief all warred for prominence within me. I did the only thing I could do, sobbing and howling like a wounded beast.

"My power might not be as amazing as yours, but I've always been able to tell what other people are thinking. Because of that, things have happened that have made me sad…"

The lady…Yuriko Sasaki told me all about her power.

There's a monster called a *satori* that's said to live in the deep mountains of Hida. Like Yuriko, it's able to read people's minds and tell what they're thinking. Yuriko said that normal people feared her and found her unsettling, as if she were that monster. She was the reason I became interested in the supernatural and eventually decided to study it.

"But you know, it hasn't been all bad. I'm using my power to do a job that involves listening to people. A lot of people just want someone to nod and agree and help them sort out their feelings. Some people call me a fraud or a glorified fortune teller, but I try not to let that bother me. What I'm trying to say is, you've been gifted with a power that other people don't have. Maybe there's a better way to use it."

"…The only thing I can do is kill people."

"That's not true." Yuriko smiled. "If your power is strong enough to kill people, you can do all kinds of other things with it, too. Superman and Batman could kill people if they wanted, but they don't. They choose to be heroes instead."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you don't know them? I'll have to show you a video next time I come visit."

I stared at her, shaken to my core.

"M-Ms. Yuriko, are you…going to be my foster mother?"

"I'd like to. But it's not up to me, I'm afraid."

Then out of nowhere, she told me to close my eyes. I did and felt the sensation of something hard settling on my left arm. When I opened my eyes, I saw a string of colorful shining beads.

"It's a pretty bracelet, isn't it? It might be a little big for you now, but…would you like it?"

The bracelet looked like it would fall if I relaxed my arm. I hurriedly took it off and grasped it with both hands.

"When you're a little bigger, and if you still think you and I could be friends…"

My face went red. She was reading my thoughts again. I'd *just* been thinking this lady might be the kind of person I could be friends with.

"…maybe you could come live with me? I'm sure two people with interesting powers could have a nice life together."

I nodded. Quickly. Several times. I felt like if I hesitated for even a moment, Yuriko would think better of the idea and call the whole thing off.

Several years passed. I graduated from middle school, and Yuriko officially adopted me. She really was a very kind woman. Along with her husband, Kenichi—sadly deceased now—the three of us lived like a real family. The food she made was delicious, and I put on a lot of weight. But people started to say that my mother and I looked alike, and that made me happy.

Even though I was surrounded by good people and being shown so much kindness, the terrible parts of me that I'd inherited from my birth parents weren't going to go away. But I was at least able to become a real human. All thanks to Yuriko. After that incident, I stopped hurting people. I started venting my violent and abusive tendencies on the supernatural instead.

That bracelet is so precious to me. It's like an umbilical cord linking me with Yuriko. The time will come when I have to part ways with her. She will die one day. The mother I was blessed with will be lost once more. When that happens, I probably won't be able to stay human anymore.

For now, I'm doing okay. I have Aoyama. He's there to protect me, to cheer me up when I need it, and to take care of my health. He's someone who could be like a mother to me. It's something I've

learned all too well—people die. They disappear and are gone forever. That's why you can't rely too heavily on any one person. You need to have a spare ready.

Not so long ago, I thought of Aoyama as something like a puppy. He was sweetly virtuous in a way that made him impossible to hate. Amiable. Considerate. But that was all. The incident a few months ago changed that. I realized he trusts me. He trusts me from the very bottom of his heart and is willing to tread the same path as me. And not just because he's being nice. That kind of presence in one's life… That's what a mother is, isn't it?

It was a mistake to let Mononobe find out. "Makes my skin crawl," he said. You only use those words when you find something creepy or unpleasant. I never let his abuse get to me. Mononobe is better acquainted with suffering than I am. He's physically disabled, and even now, a fell presence continues to eat away at his body. He's younger than me, but I doubt he'll live to be the age I am now.

He has a family, though. His mother, his father, all the people in his life love and support him. There is no way someone like that could understand how I feel. Is it so wrong for me, having been abandoned by my mother, to seek out a new one? Is it so strange for me to fear my mother's death? People who have always had a mother have no idea how precious they are.

Then there's Aoyama. I'm worried about him. There's a good chance that while I'm here, trapped in this strange dream, he's going through something similar. I don't want him to have to suffer.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

I shove aside one of the women with blotched faces and get to my feet. When I do, their heads all snap up at once. They have downturned eyes, delicate noses, and rather small mouths. Every face the same. I bite the inside of my cheeks to stifle a scream.

"Why are you here?"

A raw, plantlike smell floods my nostrils. It's just the smell of grass, but it's so sharp that it hurts my head. A strong grip grasps my shoulder from behind.

"Why?"

The women disappear. The pews disappear. The church disappears. Now there's just an empty space where one tall woman in heavy makeup stands.

"I didn't call for you. Get out of here, pig."

Every time her mouth moves, powder falls from her face. The makeup around her mouth is cracked and flaking. I hear a grinding noise. I understand too late. This is the sound Toshihiko described. Haruko and his stalker really are one and the same. But if that's the case, who was the woman whose duplicates filled the church pews?

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

I'm having trouble thinking. I can't visualize my palace. Only one thing comes to mind.

"I'm sorry, Mommy."

"Rumi! Are you okay?"

It's Aoyama. I'm back in my office. Of course. I finished my fieldwork for the day, came back here, and fell asleep. Then I had that dream.

"I'm…sorry, Mommy…"

I grasp his arm and mutter the same sentence the women in the church did. I can feel his body shaking. I clamp my mouth shut and look up at him.

"You call your mother 'Mommy' when you're at home?"

He smiles a carefree smile and makes some inane comment about the contrast to my usual demeanor.

Mononobe wouldn't understand. A good, strong person like him never could. He could never understand the feelings of abnormal people like me and Toshihiko.

"Maybe I should call you Mommy from now on, too?" I ask.

My voice is trembling. Aoyama doesn't seem to notice. He just points out that he's a man.

6

Aoyama opened the office door to hear a groaning. He looked around for Rumi and spotted her lying on the sofa. She was moaning

horribly.

"Rumi."

He shook her lightly, and her arm fell from in front of her face. Her glasses were askew. There were traces of tears around her eyes.

"Rumi! Are you okay?" he called out more forcefully this time.

"Mommy!"

Rumi suddenly woke up and grasped his arm.

"I'm…sorry, Mommy…"

Taken aback to suddenly find Rumi burying her tearstained face into him, Aoyama gently wiped her eyes.

"Rumi, what happened? Are you all right?"

Their eyes met. Rumi's widened in surprise, and she fell prostrate on the sofa with enough force to send Aoyama flying. She was so adorable when she was embarrassed. He let out a little chuckle.

"You call your mother 'Mommy' when you're at home?"

Rumi slowly looked up from the sofa and readjusted her glasses. She didn't answer Aoyama's question. Did she think he was making fun of her? He hastened to clarify.

"I was just surprised; you usually say 'Mom' or 'my mother' when I'm around. It's a nice contrast to how you usually are."

"Maybe I should call you Mommy from now on, too?"

Her last syllable seemed to trail off, probably from embarrassment.

"Oh, come on, knock it off. Besides, I'm a man. Obviously."

The panic he'd been feeling a short while ago had dissipated. He made Rumi a latte with lots of milk and told her about what he'd learned from Miki. He also recounted how Haruko Kadowaki had gone to the Pádraig Aoba Church, and that the person spreading the story about her curse might be her son, Yuuki Sayama. Finally, he told her about the strange lady he and Miki had seen in the park. Rumi drank her hot latte down in one gulp.

"Did you have the dream?"

"The dream?"

"The Haruko dream. The one that starts off in the church."

She looked at him with a deadly serious expression.

"No, I didn't. I guess I wouldn't. I'm a grown-up, and I don't have anything to do with the school. Maybe I had the encounter while I was awake instead."

The moment the words were out of his mouth, he remembered. "Asleep, awake, it's all the same," Mononobe had said. Was this what the shaman had been talking about all along? That Haruko could appear anywhere, anytime? That Haruko existed as more than just a presence in people's dreams?

"We should hurry. We don't have much time," Rumi said curtly.

"You're right… I'm worried about Toshihiko, too."

Yuuki Sayama's efforts had borne fruit. The kids at the school all knew Haruko's name now, and in spreading her story, they had made her more powerful. Gods expanded their influence by gathering more followers, more faith. This was basically the same principle.

"So, then…what should we do?" Rumi asked.

For a moment, Aoyama doubted his ears. Normally, once they knew the culprit's identity, Rumi took instant action, regardless of the strength of the person they were up against. Sometimes, Rumi would perform an exorcism herself, while other times, she'd call in another practitioner like Mononobe. She might have asked Aoyama's opinion before, but she'd never looked as lost and uncertain as she did now.

"I wish I'd never found out the truth."

Rumi choked out the words. That was strange, too. This wasn't like her at all. Curiosity was the fire that fueled her. In college, she'd always been so full of life, shining with an inner light. Whether as a tutor in Professor Saitou's seminars or outside college in her later years, she gave her studies everything she had. She threw herself into understanding any unknown quantity that presented itself. Not wanting to know something was completely alien to her.

There was very little life in Rumi's eyes now. Her tears had dried, leaving patches of salt on her cheeks.

"Rumi…"

"How am I supposed to know what to do here? What do I say to some poor kid who's being controlled by their mother when I still need a mother myself?"

He couldn't come up with a reply. He wasn't even sure he understood what Rumi was trying to say. He was silent for a while, then Rumi muttered an apology, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

"Sorry."

"You can call me Mommy if you really want to."

The words came spilling out before he even knew what he was saying. Rumi looked just as surprised as he was.

"Honestly, I don't really get what's going on here, but I'm fine with anything if it makes you feel better. And if you still don't know what to do…if getting involved in this case is too much for you, I'll figure something out myself. Because the thing is…I care more about you than I do Toshihiko."

Aoyama finally ran out of steam and fell quiet. But he'd told her how he honestly felt. He didn't know what Rumi was trying to say, really. He could at least surmise that the prominence of a mother figure in this case was causing her distress. He thought of the kind, somewhat plump middle-aged lady whom Rumi called her mother.

From an outside perspective, the two of them appeared to be on good terms. Her mom was nice to him whenever he saw her, too. But there was only ever so much you could tell about other people's relationships. Sometimes, even good people didn't gel with others for whatever reason. Either way, Rumi's unusual behavior had Aoyama worried, and even if Haruko had great power or if Toshihiko was in serious danger, getting her back to her old self was his first priority.

Rumi moved her lips a few times without forming any words. Her eyes drifted around idly. Aoyama didn't really grasp the full significance of what he'd said and felt a little embarrassed. "You can call me Mommy"? Really? She'd probably just been having a bad

dream that involved her mother and called him that while she was still half asleep.

"…Thank you."

After a few more moments passed, Rumi uttered some simple words of gratitude. She slowly got up from the sofa. At the same time, Aoyama felt an unpleasant sensation crawling up from his feet, and his face distorted in pain. He looked at Rumi and saw that she was feeling it, too.

"She's here. You can feel it, can't you? It's probably because you've met her before."

Aoyama nodded. He hadn't yet told Rumi that his link with Mononobe had sharpened his spiritual senses.

"It's Haruko, isn't it? She's close."

"Yes."

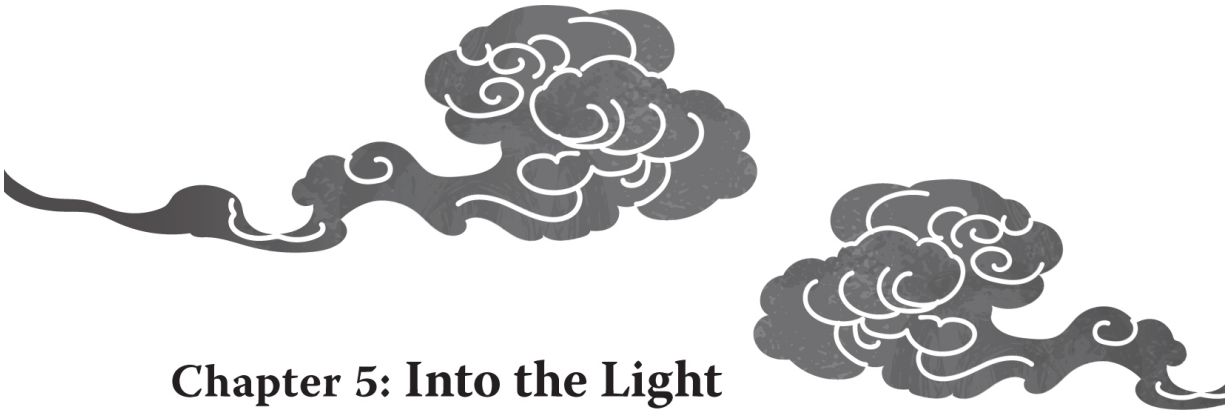
Rumi stretched out, took off her slippers, and changed into her outdoor sneakers.

"You're going? Will you…be okay?"

"I'll be fine," Rumi replied without turning around. "Please, forget everything I said just now."

"If that's what you want…"

Aoyama clammed up and followed her out the door.



Chapter 5: Into the Light

1

Toshihiko said he was feeling unwell and needed to go to the hospital. Kamemura didn't say a word. His experience and instincts honed over long years of police work told him the young man was just making excuses. But he could hardly stop him from leaving when he really did look like he might collapse at any moment.

Haruko Kadowaki had died at age thirty-three. How could she be responsible for all this harassment? Toshihiko didn't have an answer. If his Haruko really was the late Haruko Kadowaki, did that mean was he being stalked by a dead woman? But what about the used pad? Menstrual blood was like a symbol of the feminine sex and the ability to give life. How could a dead woman produce it? He didn't have any answers to those questions, either.

Had Miyoshi just taken some random sample to create his 3D model? Had he known about Haruko Kadowaki? Had he made that model just to mess with Toshihiko? That didn't seem likely. There'd be nothing in it for him.

Dragging his weary body onto the train, Toshihiko got off at Iidabashi and went through the ticket gate. The streets were dark. There was hardly anyone passing by. The regularly spaced streetlights seemed dim and hazy.

His only choice now was to put his faith in Rumi. She was the sole person who could do anything about this situation. The distance to her office, which he'd usually walk like it was no big deal, felt like a trek that would take hours. His progress was slow, almost negligible. The moment he'd parted ways from Kamemura, the relentless grinding noise had filled his head again.

Haruko Kadowaki. He thought of the woman's glistening face, thick with makeup. Kamemura hadn't been wrong. Her attachment to her beauty, her desperation to hang on to it, had been terrifyingly apparent. His head felt heavy. That woman was watching him. He felt pain in a spot somewhere behind the back of his eyes. His legs were struggling to hold him up.

"Mr. Katayama!"

Just as he was about to collapse and fall to the floor, somebody grabbed him by the arm, propping him up. Kindly eyes, somewhat rounded features… It was Yuuki Sayama. With his delicate frame, there wasn't much he could do to hold up the powerless Toshihiko, and the two of them slumped to the ground together. Even so, the moment he saw Sayama's face, Toshihiko had felt so relieved that he almost burst into tears. The man's presence seemed to put him at ease somehow.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hold you up."

"Sayama… What are you doing here?"

Sayama managed to hoist himself up and offered a hand to Toshihiko.

"My dentist just so happens to be in Iidabashi; I was on my way back from an appointment. This is a real shock, though. What are *you* doing here?"

After a moment's hesitation, Toshihiko decided to tell Sayama everything. All the mysteries that had been plaguing him. Everything

from the incident on the bridge to the direct danger he'd found himself in. Even the business with Miyoshi's imaging system and what Kamemura had told him about Haruko Kadowaki. Sayama probably would keep an open mind about all this crazy stuff, even if it was coming at him thick and fast.

He could safely dismiss Midori and Kawahara and all the other women from their workplace as possible suspects. He'd be fine to talk about it now. The only problem was, he didn't have time to go through it all in proper detail.

"Basically, I'm going to someone I know who can exorcise this thing."

"I'll come with you," Sayama said with a smile.

"Uh… No, that's okay. It's right around here anyway…"

"That won't do." Sayama took Toshihiko's arm again. "I can't just leave someone who's in such bad shape as you are right now. Besides, I've seen how hard it's been on you."

He hastened to add that he hadn't been "looking" in a weird way.

"I mean, you've seemed so down lately, and I've been worried about you. I'm glad you told me all this. This, um, ghost or whatever… I don't know much about that stuff, but this means we can do something about it, right?" said Sayama.

"Yeah, I think so. Thanks."

Toshihiko still felt nauseous and like his brain was rattling around in his head, but talking to a nice, normal person like Sayama helped him feel a little better. When Sayama joked that Toshihiko could lean on him if he wanted, it even got a smile out of him. He was just pushing off the ground to get to his feet when he heard a coarse voice behind him.

"Get away from him."

"Sasaki…?"

There stood Rumi Sasaki, wearing her usual dirty sweater. Aoyama was next to her. He normally wore a habitual mild smile, but for some reason, he was looking at Toshihiko with a strained expression.

The glare of the streetlights reflected off Rumi's glasses. He couldn't tell what kind of look was in her eyes.

"I was just coming to see you. I…I found out some things," said Toshihiko.

Leaning on Sayama's arm for support, Toshihiko managed to plant his feet and stand properly.

"What a coincidence. I was looking for you, too. I've also learned some important facts."

Rumi spoke but didn't move. Like Aoyama, she stood staring at him in silence.

"Uh… Well, I…"

Unable to bear the silence, Sayama tried to make conversation and failed. If he hadn't shown up when he had, Toshihiko would probably be passed out on the ground right now. He didn't want to make the man feel awkward.

"This is my coworker Sayama. He happened to be on his way home from the dentist and—"

"'Just so happened' to be here, huh?" Rumi interrupted. "How very convenient."

She was being weirdly prickly. She wasn't what you'd call a sociable person at the best of times, but she was rarely outright rude. Somewhat puzzled, Toshihiko went on.

"Come on, Sasaki, dial it back a little. If it wasn't for Sayama—"

"If it wasn't for Sayama, you wouldn't have had to suffer the way you have over the past few weeks."

He was about to ask her what she meant by that when he noticed something. He was feeling the same throbbing pain that he'd felt back on the pedestrian bridge.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

The grinding noise wasn't in his head this time. It was coming from right next to him.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

His arm hurt. He told Sayama to let him go, then tried to shake him off, but somehow, he couldn't bear to turn his head and face

him.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

It was inches away from his ears now.

"Yes… I…just so happened…"

Something to the left of him was mumbling the words little by little.

"Just so happened…to find him…"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"So…wonderful…"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"The most beautiful…smart…kind man…"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"Mommy…"

A shock ran through Toshihiko's left arm. He closed his eyes against the pain. A scream began rising from the very back of his throat. Before he could let it out, a thick palm fell across his mouth. He opened his eyes. Rumi was in front of him, staring at him fixedly, her eyes sharp. One arm of her glasses was broken, the lens hanging down below her eye. He was about to speak, but she just pressed her hand into his mouth again with more force. She was telling him not to speak.

"If you speak, she'll find us."

Toshihiko couldn't even nod. The grinding sound was farther away now, but it was still there. He slowly turned his head in the direction it was coming from.

It was Sayama. He was turning his neck at an unnatural angle, muttering "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy" over and over again in a thin, reedy voice. The grinding sound seemed to respond to that word, starting up every time he said it. Behind Sayama was some kind of black, shadowy form. The grinding noise was coming from there.

"Where's…Toshi…hi…ko?"

"When did you get close enough to him to call him by his first name?"

Sayama's head abruptly stopped moving.

"Answer me. When?"

"I'm…I'm his wife…"

"No, that's all in your head."

Rumi laughed derisively.

"You could never be his wife. After all, you're a man."

"No…"

"Two men can't get married in this country."

"I'm…a woman…"

"What are you talking about?" Rumi scoffed again. "You said it yourself, didn't you? 'I'm a boy.'"

Sayama let out a bestial howl. The black shadow swallowed up Toshihiko, then stretched out toward Rumi. Before Toshihiko's vision cut out completely, his eyes met Sayama's. He seemed to hear him scream that same word again and again. *Mommy.*

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

2

The moment they stepped out of the office, it was clear something was wrong. The streetlights had all gone out. Even Trabzon, the Turkish restaurant across the street, which usually lit up the night through the week, had fallen dark. There was just one tiny light in the darkness—Toshihiko Katayama.

The night was cloudy, so there wasn't any moonlight to see by. But even in the dark, Toshihiko's face was still dazzlingly beautiful. Aoyama tried to run to him but felt something hold him back. Rumi had grabbed his sleeve and was firmly pulling him away.

"You can't."

Even if she hadn't spoken, he would have realized what she meant. It wasn't that Toshihiko was shining. A large, mist-like shadow was wrapping around his body, trying to envelop him completely. Contrasted next to that darker-than-dark mist, Toshihiko's pale skin seemed to glimmer like a gemstone.

"Get away from him!" Rumi yelled.

"Sasaki…"

Though they weren't very far away from each other, Toshihiko's voice sounded like it was coming from a long way off.

"I ■■s just ■■■■■■ ■■ see you. ■…I ■■■■■ ■■■ some thing■."

When Toshihiko spoke, the black mist seemed to writhe and sway. Somehow, it seemed both as opaque and black as ink, but also like a woman's face.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

The sound of grinding teeth echoed throughout the street, drowning out whatever it was Toshihiko was trying to say.

"What a coincidence. I was looking for you, too. I've also learned some important facts."

Rumi's voice was still perfectly clear. The grinding noise and the black shadow weren't interfering with her.

"Die."

A low voice emanated from the mist. A cracked, hoarse voice, cursing them.

"This ■■ ■■ ■■worker Sa■■■■. ■■ happened to be ■■ ■■■ ■■■ home ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■ and—"

"'Just so happened' to be here, huh?" Rumi interrupted. "How very convenient."

"■■■■ ■■, Sasaki, ■■■■ ■■ back ■ little. If ■■ ■■■■'■ ■■■ ■■yama—"

"If it wasn't for Sayama, you wouldn't have had to suffer the way you have over the past few weeks."

Rumi's lips formed into a thin smile as she began to spout forth in her usual eloquent manner. The shadow seemed to shrink at the sound of her voice but then spread out again. Rumi kicked at the ground. The next moment, Toshihiko was crouched at Rumi's and Aoyama's feet. It had all happened in an instant. Somehow, Rumi had pulled him away from the black mist and brought him back to them. Toshihiko was about to speak, but Rumi clamped a hand over his mouth.

"If you speak, she'll find us."

The mist was still going through its cycle of expanding and contracting, gradually forming into the shape of a person.

"No, that's all in your head."

Rumi seemed to be holding a conversation with someone Aoyama couldn't see.

"You said it yourself, didn't you? 'I'm a boy.'"

He felt a sudden intense pain. It was only then that he realized his shoulders had hit the ground. His vision began to blur. His hands were touching the tiled street, but he couldn't feel anything other than the ground beneath him.

"Rumi…"

She wasn't there anymore.

"Toshihiko?"

Before his eyes, Toshihiko was being swallowed by the darkness.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

The ghastly grinding noise came from every direction.

3

I went to Aoba South Elementary, just like you. Only for a short time, though. Unlike you, I was a cute kid. And unlike you, I had to dress up like a girl. A long time ago, my mommy was a beautiful lady. A ballet dancer. She never hit it big overseas, but here in Japan, she was something like a pop star.

The thing about her was, she hated men. *Hated* probably isn't a strong enough word. She *despised* them.

"They all just take whatever they want from me."

I think I remember her saying that. What were they taking from her, exactly? Honey, maybe? You know how bees gather nectar from flowers? Mommy used to look at men like they were nothing but insects. You'd think if she hated them so much, she could have just avoided them, but she went out with them all the time. Not just my daddy, but other men, too.

My daddy was a nice man. He never got mad at her. But I really think he should have. He should have gotten mad, should have hit

her, should have locked her up and punished her until she learned to never act that way again. But he didn't, so she got the wrong idea. She started to think the reason he never got mad at her was because he didn't love her.

"Daddy doesn't love me anymore."

She told me that herself. And when she said that, her face got really, really scary, and she started grinding her teeth. Really loud, too.

"He never gets mad at you, does he? He must not love you, either."

Krsh, krsh, krsh… The noise got louder, and her gums started bleeding. I was so scared and sad, and I believed every word of it. Of course, the idea that Daddy had so many other women that he had no time for Mommy and me was all a delusion. That wasn't possible. Daddy worked harder than anyone, and whenever he got even a little time off, he would spend it with us.

Mommy, on the other hand, had lost her job and her popularity, and she spent every day with a different man. But I still loved her. I looked up to her. So when she left, I went with her. Before she became a dancer, she used to live around here. She'd lived in a lovely house with a view of the church. That house wasn't there anymore, so we rented an apartment from which we could see the church.

Mommy went to the church for a while, but she stopped almost right away. No matter how much she prayed to God, He never stopped the aging process for her.

…Hmm? You don't know what the aging process is? It means getting older. Getting old and ugly. I guess a kid like you wouldn't understand. You're ugly right now, after all. But to people who are pretty, losing their looks is scarier than dying.

Unlike dying, age doesn't treat people equally or fairly. You know how some people look a lot younger than they really are, and others look older? Well, unfortunately for her, Mommy was the type who looked a lot older. After we left Daddy and went to live on our own,

she turned into an old lady overnight. Her skin went wrinkly, and she got more and more gray hairs, so many that she couldn't keep up with dyeing them black again.

Maybe if she'd seen a doctor, they could have told her that something was wrong with her. But she didn't. You know how it is, right? Sometimes, people have really terrible diseases and feel so bad that they think they might die, but they refuse to go to a hospital. They're all like, "No way, hospitals are full of sick people. I'll get sick if I go there." That's so weird, isn't it? I mean, they're already sick.

Well, that's what my mommy was like. She probably felt that if she went to a hospital, it would mean admitting that she wasn't as young as she used to be. Have you ever seen a *maiko*? You know how their faces are white? Mommy used that same kind of makeup to cover her whole body. It didn't really hide the wrinkles or the stains, and if she changed her expression even a little, it would start cracking and showing the skin underneath. Her wrinkled, dry skin…

It was scary, you know? Seeing the mommy whom I loved and looked up to so much suddenly turn into this white, ghostly figure. Even the bees that gather nectar will stop coming to a flower once it's wilted.

Now that no one would come to see her anymore, she danced instead. We only lived in a small apartment building, but she used to set up a little stage made of old packing crates out front and dance there. That was her new theater. Everyone said it was creepy. So creepy, people thought there was something wrong with her and were afraid to come near.

But I watched her dance. Mommy's dancing was so beautiful. The way she spun around balanced on one leg, the way she floated around like she'd sprouted wings… Her clothes were dirty, and her makeup kept coming off her face, but she was still lovely for all that. When she was dancing, that was the only time I felt happy. It was the only time I knew nothing bad would happen.

She dressed me up like a girl. I hated it. I mean, of course I would; I was a boy. But I didn't have a choice. Mommy couldn't stand men. When I was dressed like a girl, Mommy would call me "Mommy's Little Yuki." She was so nice to me. She would keep saying how cute I was. I hated that name. Maybe if I'd been called Shintaro or something, she wouldn't have been able to change it to something girly. No… I have a feeling she'd have found a way no matter what my name was.

If I did even the tiniest boyish thing, I would hear that terrible grinding. She would grind her teeth with that terrible look on her face. So I had to wear pink and aqua colors and dresses with lots of frills and ribbons and spend my time drawing pictures and playing with dolls.

We even had to bathe together. When she washed my hair, I could hear her teeth grinding. When I opened my eyes, I could see that she was glaring at my penis. I was so scared. I couldn't relax; I thought she might try to cut it off. When we got into the tub, I had to tuck it between my legs so she couldn't see it. But even then, I could still hear the grinding.

Of course, this wasn't just when we were at home. She made me dress that way when I went to school, too.

Mommy would make me put on clothes she wore when she was little, like a checkered dress or a T-shirt with a big teddy bear on it. Any boy who wore that kind of stuff to school would get bullied for sure. I told you how there were people in the neighborhood who'd seen Mommy dancing, right? One of them was an old man called Mr. Nakano. He managed to sneak me some boy clothes that his grandson had grown out of.

Every morning, I would leave the house wearing Mommy's girl clothes, then go to the bathrooms in the park and change into clothes Mr. Nakano had given me. For a while, it went well. I made friends. I even got to play soccer and stuff with the other boys at school. But it was never going to last, lying to both Mommy and my friends like that.

One day, a boy from my class saw me changing. He called me a freak, disgusting, that sort of thing. The girl clothes were right there in my bag, so there was no use trying to deny it. Things went downhill from there. Kids can be so cruel. I hate them all. They do things that would be considered illogical or unreasonable in the adult world without a second thought. Pretty soon, school and home became a living hell for me.

I tried to endure it. After all the crying and throwing up and losing sleep, I got really thin. But Mommy just said stuff like "Oh, that's good, you're getting so slender and pretty" and "Girls really have to be thin." That was what pushed me over the edge. One day, when Mommy came home, I screwed up a frilly skirt with a big ribbon on it and threw it at her.

"I want to stop wearing this stuff!"

I'd never yelled at her before, and I was surprised at how loud my voice came out. Mommy was in the middle of putting on her makeup, but she slowly, slowly turned around. She looked at me and smiled. She looked so nice, so kind. Why hadn't I just told her how I felt sooner? She probably thought I liked dressing that way because I hadn't said anything until then. That's what I thought, at least. Still wearing that kindly smile, Mommy put a hand on my cheek.

"Yes, I suppose the ribbons look a bit childish, don't they? You're a big girl now, after all."

She was still smiling. Then she went to the closet and brought out a plain blue dress.

"You have such lovely skin. I'm sure any color would suit you."

That's when I finally realized it was no good trying to talk to her. She was completely broken. She lived in a world of her own where my words couldn't reach her. She kept showing me different outfits, just as happy as could be.

"I'm a boy."

I had no choice. I had to say it, to get it out in the open.

"I'm a boy."

I said it slowly, clearly, so she'd get the message even in the little world inside her head.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"Apologize."

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"I won't."

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"Why would you say such a terrible thing?"

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

"Because it's true. I'm a boy."

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

I was such a fool. There was no way someone who'd become as crazy as she was would accept the truth. It's like if you went back to medieval times and tried to tell them that the earth wasn't flat. They wouldn't believe you. They wouldn't understand.

Finally, Mommy stopped telling me to apologize and went right to bed. Because I wouldn't apologize. I heard her grinding her teeth, but that stopped after a while, too. That day, I took a nice, relaxing bath by myself and slept better than I had in a long time. Mommy stayed asleep the whole time, but I was sure tomorrow would be better. If I kept repeating, day after day, that I was a boy, it would get through to her eventually.

That's not what happened. The next morning, I didn't wake up the way I usually did. Our apartment was usually full of the mugwort scent of Mommy's perfume, but today, there was a different smell. A smell so bad that it prickled the inside of my nose. That was what woke me up. Mommy was bright red. She was where the smell was coming from. Her face was all slashed up. A kitchen knife was lying at her feet. She didn't cook very often; that must have been the first time she'd used it in a while.

I tried to stop the bleeding. Do you know about how women menstruate? They bleed from between their legs. Mommy had shown me menstrual pads before ("You'll have to use these someday, Yuki."), so I knew that they were very strong and good for

absorbing blood. I grabbed a whole bunch of them and tried to patch up Mommy's stomach, but it didn't work. I still have some of them. They were pretty and bright red at first, but they've dried up and gone black now.

Mommy had stopped moving. She'd gone cold. For a while, I just stood there, looking at her mutilated body. Parts of her makeup were coming away, showing the ragged red skin underneath, making it look like some grotesque polka-dot pattern. Then her mouth fell open. I couldn't help but stare at what I saw there, too.

You know how human teeth are usually all bumpy on the top? Mommy's weren't like that. They were completely flat. That made a weird kind of sense to me. I mean, she was always grinding them so much.

I wasn't really sad or frightened at the time. Not hungry, either. Mr. Nakano eventually noticed the smell and reported it, but apparently, it took three days for it to get that bad. That whole time is a blank to me. I was taken to the hospital, and the police asked me lots of questions, and then I went to live with Daddy again. Daddy and Grandma and Grandpa were all very nice to me. I wouldn't have to dress like a girl anymore.

But I should have known it wouldn't go so smoothly. I couldn't be allowed to be the only one who was happy. It was one night, when I went to the bathroom, I think. I undid my zipper, and I heard that grinding sound again. At first, I thought it was just my imagination. If I covered my ears and closed my eyes, Mommy would go away. But it didn't work.

Let me tell you something, kid. The more you try to act like something isn't there, the more you pretend you can't see it or hear it or know anything about it, the bigger it gets. Before I knew it, Mommy was with me all the time, every minute of every day. I could see it was no good fighting it. I had to resign myself to my fate.

The reason this was happening, the reason Mommy was with me all the time now, was because I'd killed her. I was a girl. A girl, just like Mommy. Mommy's Little Yuki. But I'd pretended to be a boy and

made Mommy sad and ruined her life. Being a boy was what killed Mommy. I was terrible.

Mommy said that she wanted to do her life over again. The reason she was never happy was because she'd married Daddy, she said. And that was because there were no other decent men in her life, only the ones who flocked around her like bees. Apparently, having a good man was the sole way for a woman to be happy.

How do you know if a man's decent or not? He needs to be rich, he needs to be smart, and most of all, he has to have a handsome face. You marry someone like that, and you get to be happy. Someone like Daddy just wasn't good enough. But Mommy couldn't get married anymore. That's why I had to do it for her. Mommy's happiness was Yuki's happiness. Yuki's happiness was Mommy's happiness.

I searched and searched for the right man, and finally, I found him. His name is Toshihiko. He's got plenty of money, and he went to a good college, so he must be smart, too. And handsome? He's downright beautiful. I don't think a more beautiful person could possibly exist. Even the hottest pop stars look like moldy old potatoes compared with him. I saw him on the train one day. I just so happened to find him. He sparkled like the stars in the sky.

I did my best to find out where he worked and got a job there, too. Toshihiko was the only one who sparkled there; the rest of the place was like a muddy quagmire. Obviously, he was attracted to me, too. We hit it off right away. He told me he loved me. He gave me a ring. We're married now. That means we should be living together, but for some reason, he never comes home.

That's strange, isn't it? He's my husband, so we should live together. We have to be together. Mommy will be sad again if we're not. She'll never be happy. That's why I must, must, must live with Toshihiko. He has to make me happy. Mommy said that she'd help me. Of course she will—my happiness is her happiness. But I'm sad to say there's not a lot she can do to help right now.

Why do you think that is?

It’s because there’s hardly anyone left who remembers her. You’ve never heard of a ballerina named Haruko Kadowaki, have you? I’m not blaming you. You’re just a kid. She was at her most popular a long time ago. Back then, she had a ton of fans and people professing their love for her, and plenty more people who vaguely knew about her. They’d remember her once they heard her name, at least.

If nobody remembers her, if no one knows who Haruko Kadowaki is, she won’t have any power. You remember what I said before, right? The more you try to ignore something, the stronger it gets. That’s why I need *you* to tell everyone about Mommy. Do it right, so they know who she is and so they think about her every day. It’s all right. Mommy really will appear if you call her. It won’t count as lying.

See? She’s here with us now. You can hear it, can’t you? The grinding. That’s right. This is Mommy. Isn’t she pretty? What’s that? Why you? Because you piss me off. Oh, don’t cry. That’s only going to make you even more annoying.

How could I not hate you? You’re such a plain, homely-looking boy, and you go dressing like that and wearing makeup. You don’t even get bullied for it. You actually seem to have a lot of friends. I bet your mom is homely as well. But she’s probably happy all the same. What? Why? Damn, you’re annoying.

Mommy, stop it. He can’t do anything for us if you kill him.

Anyway, that’s why I need you to tell as many people as possible. Make sure everyone remembers Haruko Kadowaki. Then Mommy will get stronger, and Toshihiko will finally notice me.

4

Aoyama’s eyesight was barely functioning. He could only see the streetlights very faintly. The same went for the buildings. Trapped in that dark cloud of nothingness, he sensed a sharp, grassy scent filling his nostrils. He wasn’t sure why his consciousness was still as clear as this. He had the unpleasant feeling that parts of his body were being pulled around in unnatural ways.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

He heard it close by. It was Haruko. Haruko was here. She was probably right behind him. Having achieved her goal of securing Toshihiko, she had removed Rumi for hurting her feelings, and now she was coming for Aoyama.

What was Haruko's ultimate goal, though? Was it to possess Yuuki Sayama—her own son—and have him achieve happiness as a woman? What would that even mean? If she was as powerful as this, why even involve her son? Why not possess her ideal man right from the outset? Now that the school kids had spread her story and made her more powerful, why should she go about things in such a roundabout way?

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

Haruko was close enough now to be breathing down his neck. Rumi had said they were short on time. She was right. In just a few moments, Aoyama would be completely and utterly swallowed by the black mist.

The image of Rumi helplessly apologizing, saying, "I'm sorry, Mommy," drifted into his mind. She'd turned her tear-filled eyes to him and clung onto his arm like a frightened young girl. She'd asked him if he'd had "the dream." Then she'd talked about a poor kid being controlled by his mother and how she needed a mother, too…

"Ah!" He let out a cry as understanding dawned.

It made sense now. Rumi had probably seen Haruko in her dreams. Why else would she ask him if he had, too? Normally, the Haruko dream only affected children. Rumi must have had a dream and seen Haruko in it. Not just Haruko herself but also her son, Yuuki Sayama, who was being controlled by her. Was she feeling some kind of affinity with him? Aoyama didn't know if they'd had a similar upbringing or if it was something else, but Rumi clearly wasn't going to able to bring her A game to this confrontation.

Krsh, krsh, krsh…

The grinding hadn't stopped. It was so loud, he could feel his eardrums vibrating. His shoulders were killing him. His shirt felt

damp; he was probably bleeding. But Haruko hadn't attacked him yet. She hadn't done anything when she'd appeared at the park, either. He could only think of one reason for that. Aoyama had something that Rumi and Toshihiko didn't—Mononobe's protection.

He opened and closed his hand a few times. Warmth started to return to his fingertips, and he found he was able to move again. He took a deep breath. His throat made a choking sound like he'd loosened up a glob of phlegm, and he went into a violent coughing fit. Apart from that, he was fine.

It was all in his head. The ground shaking, the black mist covering the world—none of it was real. When he ignored it and focused on himself, he was able to stand up without any trouble. The ground was solid beneath him. Calm now, he strained his eyes and was able to discern a person a short distance away. It was a petite man with a delicate frame. He wore a white shirt and beige chino pants. That must be the real Yuuki Sayama.

"Mommy…"

He was muttering deliriously.

"Mommy…"

Aoyama remembered how sad Rumi had sounded. Much like her, Sayama's eyes were moving rapidly back and forth, like he just couldn't calm down. Big, round eyes, mouth and nose on the smaller side, somewhat androgynous features…but he was still unmistakably a man.

Mononobe said waking or dreaming made no difference. Miki said he'd made up the seventh mystery story using an old manga as a reference. Aoyama had read that arc himself. The detailed settings, the strict rules… That's right, there was one rule that didn't make sense—the win condition, as it were. That would normally be impossible, unthinkable. The dream was designed to make Haruko and her curse as frightening and as powerful as possible. Why provide a way out of it?

Deep down inside Aoyama, certainty was forming. He had to end this. And he had a feeling he knew how.

"I found the boy."

The grinding abruptly stopped.

"I found the boy."

He said it again, clearly and calmly.

"Mommy…"

Sayama's eyes were still empty, but he'd shifted his gaze toward Aoyama. He could hear him. He had to keep him talking.

"Yuuki Sayama. You're a boy. You're *the* boy."

"Mommy…"

"I don't doubt that the story you told Miki was the truth. But one thing about it seemed strange to me. If Haruko really wanted a wonderful new life for herself, why would making you pursue her idea of a woman's happiness bring her any comfort?"

"Mommy…"

"Haruko Kadowaki… Your mother—she was more of the free and easy type. To be blunt, she was self-centered. Why would someone like that care if her child was happy? The reason she made you dress like a girl was because she hated men so much. It doesn't seem like she wanted you to live out her dreams for her, either."

"Shut up."

Sayama had finally turned toward Aoyama and spoken of his own accord. His voice was quiet but seething with rage.

"What would you know?"

Sayama's legs shifted as if he was getting ready to charge forward.

"I know."

The street was suddenly so still and quiet that it hurt Aoyama's ears. There was no sign of Haruko. And the reason for that…

"Haruko is just someone you made up."

Sayama's eyes went wide in surprise.

"That's not true! Mommy's right here!"

Sayama pointed to the left of him.

"I don't see her. There's no one there."

There was a loud *thump*, as though something heavy had hit the ground. Aoyama turned in the direction it had come from to see

Toshihiko and Rumi lying in a heap.

"Mommy *is* here! She's always with me!"

"No, she's not. She's dead. She's dead, and she has no reason to stay with you."

"But Mommy… She was mad at me. She's mad because…because I said I was a boy…" Large tears were flowing from Sayama's eyes now. "I… I killed her…"

"No, you didn't."

Aoyama was firm.

"Haruko Kadowaki was murdered by a man who broke into her apartment. You had nothing to do with her death."

He'd gotten this information from the text his father had sent him. A violent criminal had attacked and killed Haruko Sayama. Yuuki was eight years old at the time. His memory of seeing his mother's body was probably fairly accurate. But his mind must have been seriously shaken by the shock of it all. The idea that his mother killed herself because he'd gone against her wishes was never anything more than pure supposition.

Someone was coughing nearby. Rumi was rising unsteadily to her feet. Toshihiko also seemed to have come around, his eyes half opening.

"I heard the seventh mystery story that Miki spread around. For the most part, it was a fictional tale made up by a child. But there was one part that rang true to me. 'Help me find the boy.' Not 'Help me find Taro' or 'Help me find my son.' Those words didn't come from Haruko, but from you."

That had been what seemed so unnatural about the story of a pitiable mother searching for her beloved son that Miki had told.

"There's only one boy you've been looking for this whole time—yourself. Your identity as a man, which was denied to you."

In the corner of his eye, he could see Rumi stretching out one of her arms. He knew what she was trying to do. She always did it when dealing with paranormal threats.

"No!"

Sayama's eyes were bloodshot. At some point, he'd moved close enough that he was now right in front of Aoyama.

"No, no, no! I… Mommy was…"

"All you did was stand up to your mother. You tried to do what she said, tried to be the ideal girl she wanted you to be…but you couldn't. This was your way of showing her that you were different from her."

"Don't talk like you understand!"

Sayama wrapped his hands around Aoyama's throat. He squeezed, but there was no real power in it.

"Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of abnormal parent-child relationships. One is where the child rejects everything the mother says. In that case, the mother is still the one in control. The child is still letting what she says dictate their actions. The other is like yours, where the child tries to emulate the mother. But even if they copy her as exactly as they can, the slightest little difference still shines through. You can never stifle your true self completely."

He gently took Sayama's hands away from his neck.

"I found the boy."

He heard the grinding noise. He started feeling dizzy again. The hands, which he'd moved away, pushed against him, stronger now. He felt dizzy. It was like all the oxygen was rapidly draining out of his brain.

"There's no going back now," Sayama said in a low voice.

Aoyama couldn't see his face anymore. All he could see was Haruko Kadowaki, clinging onto Sayama's head like a grotesque mask. *Krsh, krsh, krsh…* Something was making the grinding noise, but Haruko was smiling. A lovely, contented smile.

"I will…have you make me…happy, Toshihiko. Then…Mommy will…"

Aoyama's vision started to blur. His lips opened and closed, gasping for air. He tried to call for Rumi and closed his eyes. *Help me*, he wanted to say but couldn't. What right did he have to ask for help when everyone else was suffering so much worse?

"I can't make you happy," came a hoarse voice. "But I do think we could help each other find our own happiness."

Toshihiko weakly took Sayama's arm.

"I don't get the way you think at all, Sayama."

The hands around Aoyama's neck weakened, then threw him to the floor. His lungs desperately tried to take in oxygen, and the blood seemed to rush to his head all at once, making him feel nauseous.

"Even if my mother died spouting hate and resentment at me, I wouldn't think anything of it. I'd still hold a funeral for her and remember every now and then the good times when she was nice to me. But that's all. I'm not that emotional. I've never really understood human feelings, love included."

"What? But…you're so kind…"

"Only because I've been copying you."

He grasped Sayama's arm and went on.

"By watching you, I learned how to act like a 'nice' or 'kind' person. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be like you."

Toshihiko gave a rueful laugh.

"Although, I guess you weren't so normal after all."

His smile was so beautiful, it was rather intimidating.

"What exactly did you mean about the ring?"

He asked the question like it was some inconsequential part of a casual conversation. Even now, the grinding sound hadn't gone away. But Aoyama no longer felt gripped by fear.

"Did you mean the ones I got from the LaQua spa this summer? Those rubber ones with the lights inside? They were giving them out at the door; I got a bunch of them. I figured if I gave one to Harukawa, she'd get the wrong idea… Looks like you did, too."

"Wrong idea…? No, I—"

"You got the wrong idea. I don't love anyone. I don't think I can. In a weird way, though, it's not so bad, knowing how you feel about me."

Sayama gaped like a fish choking around on dry land.

“Maybe it’s because I looked up to you so much. It works out pretty well, don’t you think? I want to keep studying how to act normal from you, and you love me and want to marry me. You’re not really normal, and I don’t love you back. But if we’re both okay with that, it shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

Aoyama was starting to realize just how irregular a person Toshihiko Katayama really was. After everything he’d been through, he was shrugging it off like it was nothing. His eyes were sparkling like dancing stars, just like they always did. He wasn’t lying. Nothing seemed to suggest he was making all this up solely to placate Sayama.

For his part, Sayama didn’t look too sure of himself. His gaze darted in every direction. He seemed to firm his resolve and opened his mouth to speak. Then there was a loud *crack* like a circuit breaker being flipped. All of a sudden, Sayama was down on one knee. He’d passed out.

“I finally did it.”

That was Rumi’s voice. Finally did what? Aoyama wasn’t sure, but the streetlights were back on now. Rumi’s cheeks, which had been deathly pale this whole time, now had a little bit of color in them. That was enough for him.

“Well then, Sir Toshihiko.”

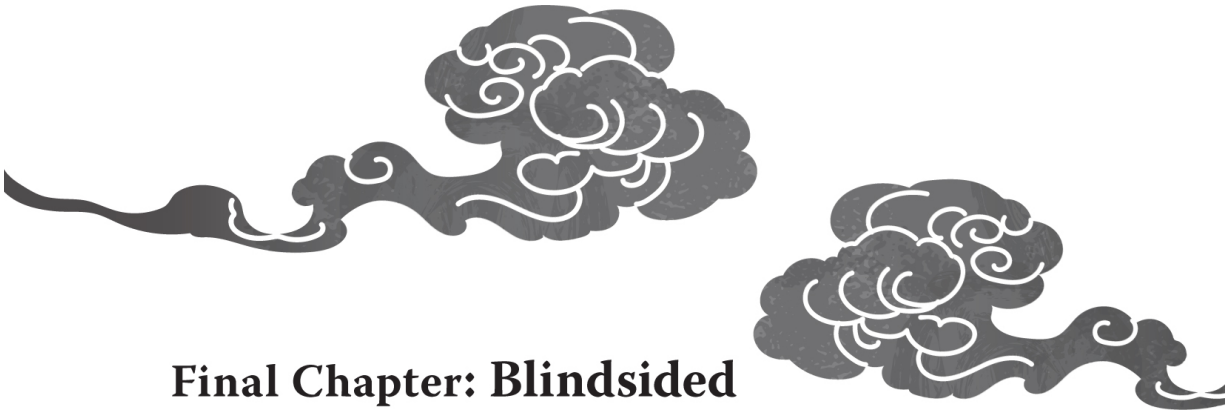
Toshihiko was still holding Sayama’s arm.

“What will you do now?”

“Nothing at all.”

Toshihiko swung the limp arm back and forth.

“Just one more interesting thing in my life.”



Final Chapter: Blindsided

1

"I'm getting married next month."

Midori dropped the bomb while they were sitting at their usual booth at their usual bar. Her cute, bell-like voice was bright and happy. She couldn't conceal her joy.

"Congratulations." Toshihiko gave an exaggerated bow. "Why didn't you announce this at work, though?"

Midori lowered her voice conspiratorially.

"There's people there who might react to it badly. You know, like Ootani…"

"Yeah, I guess so."

A while back, Ootani had taken one of the women at the office to task after she heard her refer to her husband as "the man of the house."

"Oh, you mean he's the one in charge? Have you no will of your own? Are you just a slave to him?"

She seemed to think that all relationships between men and women were founded on violent power struggles and that anyone who refused to put up a fight was beyond forgiveness. An announcement of marriage would have undoubtedly drawn her ire.

"Say, Katayama."

Midori stared at Toshihiko fixedly.

"You find me pretty annoying, right?"

He wasn't sure how to respond when asked point-blank like that. She seemed to take his silence as assent, though.

"Don't worry, I get it. I love your face so much, I can barely stand it."

"My face?"

"Yeah, your face. It's the best."

She downed the lemon sour cocktail she'd been drinking.

"It's okay if you know this now, but I used to be a total fangirl for pop idols. The male ones, that is. If you're wondering why I'm talking in the past tense, it's because you ruined me for the rest of them. You just look so wonderful. I could sit and stare at your face for hours. I like it so much, I ended up pestering you about every little thing and glancing at you whenever I got a spare moment. I get how that would have been creepy. I'm sorry."

She lowered her head in apology. Toshihiko was feeling more bewildered all the time. He thought back over Midori's past words and actions. She'd definitely had a dreamy look in her eyes whenever she spoke to him. It was a gentle, affectionate gaze. He'd thought it meant she had romantic feelings for him.

"Sorry if I slip into fandom terms, but…I was on 'Team Toshihiko,' y'know? You were my golden idol. I'd have headed up your cheer squad any day of the week, but I wasn't, like, *into* you."

Unraveling all that, Midori had viewed Toshihiko as something of an unattainable idol. She'd wanted to support him and admire him from afar but had never really considered romance as a serious option.

"How about that…? I was the one who got the wrong idea," he muttered under his breath.

Midori didn't hear him, but he said it was nothing important and finished up his *oolong-hai*. His cheeks were flushed, and not just because he wasn't used to alcohol. Pure and simple, he was embarrassed at the mistake he'd made.

Remorse closed in on him for thinking Midori might have been the stalker and for how cautious he'd been around her. When she'd said it was strange how obsessed he was getting with the welfare of one student, she'd just been giving him some good advice.

Speaking of Mirei Nakamura, she had withdrawn from Matsuno Juku. According to Hirona Ushijima, she'd returned to school and still wasn't too enthused about studying, instead playing around with various guys.

"Anyway, it's fine. I'm the one who should be sorry."

Apologies for all kinds of things started spilling out of Toshihiko's mouth.

"Nah, it's fine. The way I was acting, it's only natural you'd be cold toward me."

After they'd gone back and forth apologizing to each other for a while, Toshihiko changed the subject.

"So, what kind of guy is your fiancé? You got a picture of him?"

"What, are you hoping he's a cool guy like you?"

She brought out her phone and brought up a picture. A man with a healthy, prosperous physique that many people would find appealing smiled back at him.

"Looks kind of like Winnie-the-Pooh, don't you think?" said Midori.

"Yeah. He's cute rather than cool."

"I know, right?" Midori laughed loud and shrill. "He's a gentle giant, and he gets on well with my mom, too. She's in a wheelchair, and he once carried her up three flights of stairs to get to a restaurant that didn't have an elevator. He said that no matter what might happen, he's got my back. He really is a great guy."

"Sounds like it."

Toshihiko was happy for her. Perhaps it was Midori's destiny, as someone who was so thoroughly dependable, to meet someone just as wonderful and reliable as her. Rumi probably would have given him a look that could freeze the blood in his veins if he ever brought up the idea of destiny, though.

"What about you, Katayama? Don't you have anyone special in your life? If you want, I could—"

"No need. I don't have anyone. And honestly, I don't think I need anyone."

He cut her off before she could offer to set him up with one of her friends.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be a busybody. Of course you don't *need* any help from me. You've probably got so many admirers that you have to beat them off with a stick… I don't know, though. A person would have to be pretty confident in themselves to approach you directly."

Vaguely agreeing with the sentiment, he thought of Yuuki Sayama. He'd quit his job at Matsuno Juku after the incident. The staff who worked at the cram school were all temp workers without regular contracts, so you wouldn't have thought any one person would get too much attention. But *everyone* seemed to like Sayama. They'd thrown him a pretty big farewell party and had seemed genuinely sad to see him go.

Sayama had told them he had to leave to help out at his father's company. He *was* going back to his family home, and his next place of employment would be the company that his father ran, but it wasn't the whole truth. Sayama had told Toshihiko the real reason in private.

"If we keep working together, I'm going to end up wanting to kill anyone who even looks at you. One little slipup, and I won't be able to hide it anymore."

Toshihiko had agreed that, given the circumstances, Sayama leaving probably was the best thing. Now that he knew the truth, Toshihiko wasn't scared anymore, but Sayama's mysterious power

could still be an issue. If he ended up cursing anyone who showed Toshihiko the slightest bit of affection—like what had happened with Mirei and Kawahara—things could get complicated. Even someone as emotionally dense as Toshihiko could see it was better not to take that risk.

Parts of Sayama were still under the dominion of his mother's illusion, which he'd created. Rumi had said they were likely dealing with an accomplished hexer. She'd also surmised that said hexer might be manifesting his power subconsciously. Both of those predictions had proven true in the end.

Like Aoyama had deduced, the Haruko apparition wasn't the soul of Haruko Kadowaki back from beyond the grave. Rather, it was something Sayama had created. All the repressed feelings and unresolved trauma he'd been carrying with him had manifested as that fearsome spirit. Sayama himself had no idea until it had been laid out for him.

"I feel so pathetic," he'd said with a profound look of sorrow on his face. "My life has always centered around my mother. I both loved and hated her more than anyone else. Even after those people told me her spirit never existed, that it was just something I made up, she's still here with me."

Rumi said that she'd "cut off access" between Toshihiko and the apparition. He didn't understand all the details, but his take on it was that the curse that had been clinging to him for so long had been peeled off. But it hadn't rebounded on the caster, so apparently, the principle of curse reversal hadn't applied here.

"So, do you not care about me anymore?"

When Toshihiko asked him that, Sayama had dropped his phone. He tried to pick it up but fumbled and dropped it again. With his big, expressive eyes moving around all over the place, his distress was so plain that it was actually quite fun to watch.

"You know I'd never think that…," he croaked. "I don't think anyone is capable of *not* caring about you, Mr. Katayama."

He remembered Miyoshi telling him something similar. Miyoshi had been a selfish guy, and Toshihiko still couldn't forgive him for belittling his interests. But his work had helped to save him. Compared with that debt, he could live with the shock of finding out his friend hadn't been whom he seemed. He was enjoying this cocktail of emotions he was feeling—it was almost as much fun as watching Sayama.

"So I do matter to you. Guess it's business as usual, then."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"It's like I said before. You like me, and I'm learning how to act normal from you. We're basically keeping up the same dynamic as before."

Sayama raised his voice hysterically.

"I—I don't understand you at all! Weren't you listening? I just have to *look* at you, and I start going crazy."

His hands were both firmly grasped together. The grinding sound had started, though it was still faint. Sayama seemed to notice, then hung his head in shame.

"See? What did I tell you? It's happening right now."

Being the fan of horror and the occult that he was, Toshihiko found Sayama fascinating. He'd always found things that were beyond normal understanding so interesting, so frightening, so very appealing. The Sayama before him now was a mixture of the real Sayama, of his mother as he imagined her, and of his mother's image of the girl she'd wanted him to be. How wonderful that Rumi hadn't used her power to erase those extra parts and leave just the core identity behind. He would be so much less charming otherwise.

"Hey, you want to move in with me?"

"What?!"

"If you say no, I'll probably just stalk you instead. It'll be a role reversal."

Sayama once again exclaimed loudly that he didn't understand how Toshihiko thought. All that stuff about learning how to act normal was simply a pretense. Sayama was very clearly *not* normal, after all. This whole incident had made him aware of the abnormal power he possessed, and it was only going to cause him more grief from now on.

Aoyama would have taken the time to slowly but surely heal Sayama's fractured, fragile psyche. If Toshihiko hadn't butted in, that was probably how this story would have ended. And if that happened, Sayama would one day be freed from his mother's curse and go on to live a happy life as the man he was always meant to be.

Mononobe would have used his supernatural power without a moment's thought—and without asking for consent—to seamlessly amalgamate those disparate personae into one. The method would be a bit violent, but the new Sayama would undoubtedly still go on to find his own kind of happiness.

In reality, though, Sayama had been unlucky. He'd been saved by a freak like Toshihiko, who prioritized his own interests over others' welfare. Toshihiko had finally accepted—or perhaps resigned himself to—his abnormal nature. He still liked the idea of normality, and he didn't want people he had zero interest in falling in love with him. But next to this fascination he felt now, all that was of secondary importance.

Cohabitation proved to be out of the question, but Toshihiko and Sayama started meeting up three times a week. Sayama's infatuation seemed to get more intense every time they met. A while back, when Toshihiko had run into his own father and said hi, Sayama had glared at the old man's retreating form as if he was going to stab him. The sound of his teeth grinding sounded so lovely. Toshihiko would probably get to hear it again when he told him he'd been out drinking with Midori. Imagining it filled him with giddy anticipation.

"One day, this is all going to come back to bite you."

That was what Aoyama had told him at the conclusion of their adventure. He was probably right, but with so much more entertainment in his life now, Toshihiko couldn't bring himself to care.

2

Today would be the seventh night since Nanaka heard the Haruko story. Aoyama and Rumi had been so busy that they'd barely had time to keep track of the days passing by. Of course, Haruko wouldn't be showing up in the girl's dreams anymore. That person had never existed, after all.

Finishing up work at the church, Aoyama made his way to the office. They were expecting a visit from a man who claimed his house had become haunted after he'd driven to a famous spiritual landmark. Aoyama opened the door to hear loud snoring. Rumi was splayed out on the sofa, sleeping soundly. All around her lay the remains of snacks, along with an empty ice cream tub. The TV was still on.

He sighed and bent down to Rumi's level. He took her bracelet out of his pocket and slid it back onto her wrist, all without waking her up.

"Nanaka told me to 'say thank you to the expert lady' for her."

Two days before, during the children's English class, he'd told Nanaka that Haruko was gone. When she heard that, she'd bowed her head in thanks and given him Rumi's bracelet to return to her.

"I think she wanted you to have this for keeps. Just in case, why don't you hold on to it through to the seventh night?"

"No, it's okay."

Nanaka hadn't backed down.

"She said she got this from her mom, right? In that case, it must be really important to her. I have to give it back."

Aoyama couldn't argue. He had a sweater his mother had knit for him back in middle school that looked absolutely terrible, but he still hadn't been able to throw it away. Nanaka had thanked him over and over again, then gone home.

This case had concluded so peacefully that it almost felt anticlimactic. Cleaning up the office seemed more daunting than any exorcism right now. Aoyama set to work picking up the garbage Rumi had scattered about her. This was the time of year when bugs were more likely than ever to be attracted to scraps of food, but she didn't seem to care.

"It's starting to feel like you really are my mommy."

Turning around, he saw Rumi, still recumbent, looking at him.

"If you ask me, cleaning up a mess is something any decent person would do, not just mothers. And I thought we were going to forget about that."

Thinking about how he'd told her she could call him Mommy if she wanted caused his cheeks to flush with embarrassment. He'd been doing whatever he could to cheer her up back then, without really thinking about the consequences.

"Kidding. Well, mostly kidding. Sorry not sorry," she sang out.

He had a feeling he hadn't heard the end of this particular joke yet, but if Rumi was back to her old self, that was all that mattered.

"Anyway, most of the credit for solving this should go to you," she said.

She hoisted herself up and sat on the sofa cross-legged.

"You gathered intel from the children, you performed an exorcism, and as the pièce de résistance, you came out with that wonderful insight at the end. I really have to tip my hat to you."

"I'm glad I was able to do something more useful than making the tea for a change. What 'insight' are you talking about?"

"You know, all that stuff about abnormal parent-child relationships. It was outstanding. Even your deductive powers leading you up to that point were impressive. I was so convinced that Sayama really was possessed by the spirit of his mother, I'd only prepared for that eventuality."

"Yeah, well… I took all that from a psychology book I just happened to read."

Some time before, a young lady with an eating disorder had come to the church for advice. It was Aoyama's father who did the counseling, but Aoyama had been worried, too. The girl had a warped perception of thinness and its value, but the root cause of her suffering was her relationship with her mother. Apparently, that was the case with a surprisingly high number of women who suffered from such disorders.

From there, Aoyama had briefly dived into literature covering the relationship dynamics between parents and children. It had been pure chance that this case provided him with an opportunity to put that knowledge to good use.

"I don't think I did anything as fancy as deduction. It was just that I had Mononobe's protection on me and had more time to think than you did. And it was really Toshihiko who resolved things, if you can even call it that."

Aoyama felt that he understood where Sayama was coming from to an extent. He'd convinced himself that he'd been responsible for his mother's death, and that guilt had caused him to see an illusory version of her. For better or worse, he possessed powers similar to Rumi and Mononobe, meaning he was able to manifest that illusion and make it real.

Just because Aoyama had been able to guess that much, it didn't mean he could have done anything for Sayama's emotional well-being. If Toshihiko hadn't stepped in when he did, Sayama probably would have strangled him to death. In contrast, Toshihiko didn't understand Sayama one bit. He'd even said so clearly and unambiguously in front of the man himself. But it was those easygoing—some might even say self-centered—words that had gotten through to him.

"Somehow, it doesn't feel like he was really trying to save Sayama or to say anything particularly profound. It was more like the whole thing just fizzled out…"

"That's how it is sometimes," Rumi said, tossing a balled-up tissue into the trash. "All the righteous and well-reasoned arguments in the

world can't compete against a handful of words from the one you love. 'A pinch of salt from a lover is still sweeter than a mountain of sugar from a stranger,' to quote Nobuko Otowa."

"You might be right."

Toshihiko had taken the dazed Sayama home without ever complaining about everything he'd put him through. Aoyama had stared after them in disbelief. After all the stalking and harassment, he thought Toshihiko's nerves would have been absolutely shot. Pulling gently on Sayama's arm as he led him away, Toshihiko had smiled benevolently. It was such a beautiful smile that Aoyama had been powerless to say anything.

"He is something like a demon, after all," Rumi mumbled.

Since Aoyama had a Christian background, comparing a person to a demon felt unnecessarily harsh to him. But on this one occasion, he was inclined to agree. Sayama had certainly looked like he'd been seduced by a devil; there was no better way to describe it.

"I'm glad you're back to your old self now. I was worried," said Aoyama.

Rumi gave a self-derisive snort.

"I really am useless in the all the ways that count, aren't I?"

She rummaged around in her handbag and brought out a lollipop.

"It's times like this I could really use a smoke. But I wouldn't want to pollute your air, so I won't."

She started out just licking the lollipop a little bit, but she soon lost patience and crunched into it, throwing the stick in the trash afterward.

"If you're wondering what I was trying to do back then…," she said, extending a hand and raising it. "What I always do when I go like this…"

Her voice was quivering.

"It's okay." Aoyama took her arm and gently lowered it. "Seriously, it's okay."

The sound of Rumi sucking in a breath echoed throughout the room.

She'd raised her hand at Sayama that day and moved like she was sweeping something to the side. It wasn't the first time Aoyama had seen the gesture. It was something she did at the conclusion of every case they worked on together. It must have had some kind of deep significance to her.

During their case with Emi Shimamoto, the young man they'd met who had similar powers to Rumi and Mononobe always raised three fingers to his mouth before performing a miracle. Aoyama suspected it was meant to represent the trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That cult was based on the man's own twisted interpretation of Christianity, after all.

Aoyama didn't know what Rumi's sweeping gesture was meant to represent. But she seemed to be having trouble bringing herself to talk about it. Perhaps it had something to do with her gloomy reaction to the concept of mothers that had come up during this case. Aoyama was still determined to walk the same path as Rumi. To do that, he would need to understand everything about her and become the type of person who could help her out.

"You can tell me when you're ready."

But there was no rush.

"I'll wait."

When he said that, a slight smile crept onto Rumi's face.

Aoyama had always thought of Rumi Sasaki as someone with extensive knowledge and a daring nature, someone who could do everything perfectly. The truth, though, was that she had weaker, vulnerable sides to her. Feeling proud that he'd managed to catch a glimpse of a deeper part of her nature, he allowed himself a glance at her face. She looked surprised for a moment, then swiftly turned away. She took a deep breath before turning to face him again. Her usual arrogant smile was back now.

"We have a new client calling on us soon. I'll be expecting you to serve up some of your usual delicious coffee."

She spoke in a jocular way and gave Aoyama's shoulder a light punch. He was still sore there from when he'd hit the asphalt. But that was okay. Rumi had always been the type of person to not show any consideration for that kind of thing.

Humming a tune of her own composition, Rumi set about unwrapping some new snacks. Aoyama was about to caution her not to eat too much when he felt a vibration in his breast pocket. He took out his phone and saw that the call was from his sister.

"Hey, Sis. Sorry, but I'm about to talk to a client, so if you need something—"

"Turn on the news."

Shouko didn't even let him finish. She sounded hoarse, distressed.

"What…?"

"Just hurry. Turn it on."

He hadn't turned the TV off yet. He did as his sister said and changed the channel. On the local news show, a familiar place had appeared—a white-walled apartment building with a church in front.

"Her mother was taken into custody…"

He barely registered what the newscaster was saying. His phone fell to the floor. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The words kept scrolling along the screen on a loop.

NANAKA YOKOZAWA (10) FOUND DEAD; ABUSE SUSPECTED; MOTHER ARRESTED

A wordless groan crawled out of the back of his throat. The space behind his eyes ached terribly. For a moment, he thought he'd burst a blood vessel and given himself a nosebleed. But there was no red—just a puddle of clear liquid on the floor.

"This girl who has the curse on her. Look for what you missed."

He wanted to rip his traitorous eyes out. What did he even need eyes like these for? What good were they if they'd missed something so important? Why had he focused so much on Haruko, someone who technically didn't even exist? Why hadn't he paid more attention to the person who *really* needed help?

Did Nanaka ever get gloomy when she spoke about her parents? When they came to the church together, did she ever seem stiff or awkward? Did she wear long-sleeved tops even in the height of summer? Did she tense up when he touched her head to give her a blessing? He couldn't remember.

Why had she never said anything to the other grown-ups at the church? Had she really been the polite, well-mannered girl they thought she was? All Aoyama could remember was Nanaka smiling that charming, innocent smile. The way she used to tickle him and laugh in that high voice of hers. Her smile. She'd smiled so much.

He'd failed to see the truth for what it was. When someone really needed him, he'd been completely blind.

* * *

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