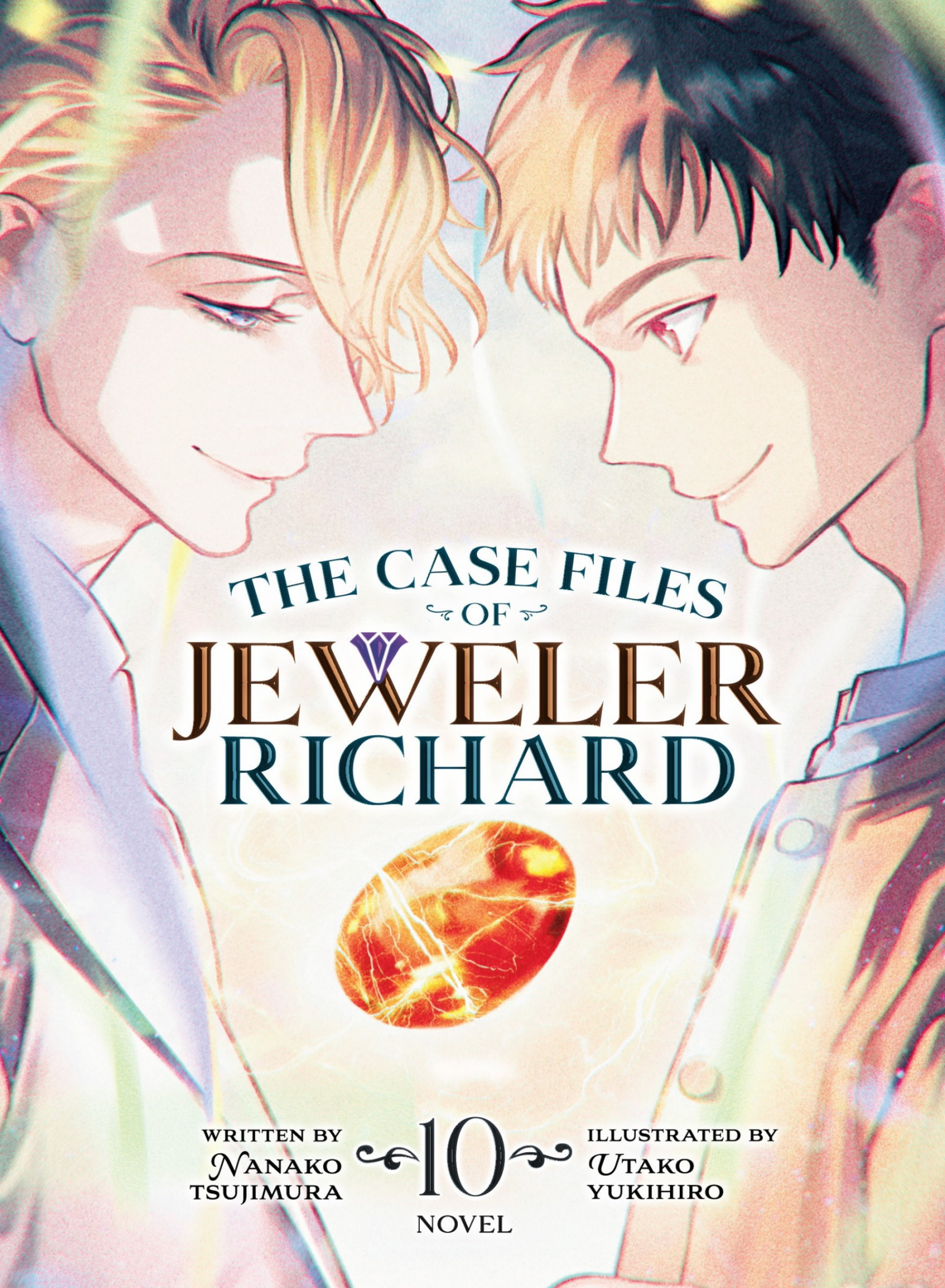

THE CASE FILES
OF
JEWELER
RICHARD
WRITTEN BY
NANAKO
TSUJIMURA
10
NOVEL
ILLUSTRATED BY
UTAKO
YUKIHIRO

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THE CASE FILES OF JEWELER RICHARD

NOVEL 10

WRITTEN BY
Nanako Tsujimura

ILLUSTRATED BY
Utako Yukihiro



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Seigi Nakata

A Tokyo native who started apprenticing as a jeweler after graduating college, thanks to connections he developed at his part-time job. Just as his name—Seigi, meaning "justice"—implies, he's an earnest young man always looking to help others, even if he may be a bit lacking in tact at times.



Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian

An English jeweler with a better command of Japanese than your average Japanese person. His incredible beauty would strike anyone, regardless of gender, utterly speechless. He has a weakness for all things sweet.

Prologue

DO YOU SUPPOSE HE REMEMBERS the moment we first met?

How much does he recall? Does he have any idea of the look on his face when he came running up to me, fighting to regain his breath?

I had hoped to find peace in Hong Kong, but I soon realized it was no more than another stepping stone on the road to rest. With my time there fresh in my mind, I arrived at this new island nation and promptly received my initiation via a lost taxi driver, a drunkard's beer, and a hero in the form of a man who always stood for justice.

When he stood up for his kinsmen and claimed, "We're not all like this," do you suppose he realized how very right he was? That not every person in this world was a champion of justice?

His childish overreach elicited both inner laughter and envy in me. It also made me wonder when I became frightened of reaching out to other people? When did I begin to pause before I reached for something beautiful, consumed by thoughts of when it might vanish?

I didn't think him helping me out was beautiful in and of itself. It was just that he caught me at a moment when I felt convinced I was the most pitiful and comical creature known to man. When he ran to my rescue without the slightest hesitation, I felt almost blinded, as if I were staring into a light trap that dispelled the darkness. That's all it was, I told myself. Nothing more.

Now, do you think the man who escorted me to the police box had even the faintest inkling how very long and deep our relationship would become? Were the question to be posed to me, my answer would no doubt be "Not in the slightest."

...No doubt.

However, it's true that I prayed to see Seigi—Seigi as in *justice*, as in *a man of justice*, according to the way he spelled his name for the police officer—just one more time.

My self-hatred faded at that moment, though only slightly. Even the secondary meaning of the word *beauty* had come to hold for me—that is, "sadness"—showed signs of slipping away. Like shadow being erased by light.

I was only faintly cognizant of it then, but I do indeed recall thinking: *Whomsoever becomes the “rightful place” of this man with a heart of living gemstone shall be a lucky soul indeed.*

OCTOBER 8TH

I won’t be able to post for a while.

I’ll be with good, trustworthy people. Don’t worry about me.

See you later.

IGGY

The First Day

THE ACCIDENT, he said, occurred at night.

Octavia Manorland was close to ten years old when she was caught in a massive avalanche. They were in the family car, which was large enough that she wasn't hurt, but the vehicle was buried in snow and stuck fast. Before long, its heater ceased to function. Her parents held her between them in the darkness of the front seat and used their body heat to keep her warm through the long night.

Help arrived in the beautiful, sunny morning.

By then, inside the snowbound car, Octavia's parents had long since breathed their last.

In my imagination, I saw my parents—Mr. Nakata and Hiromi—dying on either side of a smaller version of me to save his life. I once had a nightmare that went something like that in elementary school. I woke up bawling near dawn, and when I realized it was only a dream, I fell back asleep before even wiping the tears from my eyes. Even so, the unbearable sadness stayed trapped in some forgotten recess of my heart.

What if it hadn't been a dream? What if falling asleep and waking once more failed to relieve me from the reality that those who cared about me, those who protected me, were gone? I didn't have the words to describe that inescapable nightmare. I could barely stomach the thought of such fathomless despair.

Richard's tone was matter-of-fact from start to finish while he explained what turned Octavia into a "very motivated shut-in." The massive inheritance she received. The origins of her tyrannical personality. The complete lack of discipline she faced, as everyone, knowing about the accident, didn't want to become a villain in her eyes. The further distancing that occurred once it was known that she was a hard-to-please brat who did whatever she wanted. And so on and so forth.

This happened when Richard was in university, before the mess of the diamond inheritance. Jiro, my sweet pup, must have known this was the kind of story to make me cry. He presented his furry side to me when I began to sniffle, with "blow your nose here, master" written across his face. I took him up on his offer and buried my face in his back.

"...Boy, this is rough."

"Should I leave off here?"

"No, I'm not talking about myself. I just think this must have been so rough for Octavia. Keep talking."

"Have some tea. Royal milk tea was made for moments like this."

"Yes, sir."

I reached for the white teacup from my seat in the dining room, overlooking the garden. The tea was fresh; Richard had brewed it just prior to starting his story.

Before I picked up the cup, I told myself to get a grip. There was still more to hear.

"Hey, Richard? You said earlier that Octavia really, really hates people who champion justice. Why is that?"

"That was something she told Deborah and herself."

Why did they choose to die? she demanded.

She was furious at her parents. She was not grateful for their sacrifice—just all-consumingly mad.

I never asked for them to save me, so why did they leave me here all alone? I don't understand, and I don't want to understand! Look at them, acting like superheroes! Like it was the just *thing to do. Am I supposed to be happy about that?*

Acting like superheroes. Like it was the just thing to do. And she was supposed to be happy about that?

The delivery was harsh, but...

"I guess that's another way of saying. 'I wish they hadn't died. What did they have to die for?'"

"By and large, I would agree."

I couldn't call that outburst rude. If anything, it made so much sense to me that I agreed with her wholeheartedly. It was horrible that the avalanche occurred. If mountain spirits were real and allowed such awful things to happen, I would have expected people to tie their hair back, grab a flashlight and butcher knife, and set off to attack them. But no—the tragedy had simply been caused by

freak weather conditions. And, in the face of that tragedy, Octavia's loved ones had sacrificed their own lives to save her.

Wild horses couldn't have dragged a thank-you out of her after that. "Thank you for dying for me"—what a blood-chilling sentence. What a horrible thing to have to say.

Even so, a person could only remain numb for so long. After that, what were they to do? Turn to anger. At whom? Whom else but the people who died for them?

Octavia must have asked herself, again and again, why they made their choice. Why they saddled her with a debt that could never be repaid. To love someone, to want to keep loving someone, only to have that wrested away in an act of one-sided love—what a horror. When faced with the unacceptable or the insurmountable, people don't stay lost and panicked forever. They have to react in *some* way or lose their minds. At least, that was what I thought people were like.

Therefore, Octavia's resolute rejection of her parent's sacrifice was the way she expressed her fury. I knew anger could just be like that sometimes, though if I'd been a teen like her, I wouldn't have really understood it, either. Now, however—now that someone had told me to my face that they loved me so much they couldn't help being livid at me—I could say I at least partially knew what it was like to walk in her shoes. Octavia's anger was a manifestation of the love she wanted to give but had nowhere to put.

Hearing her story made me think: *Yeah, I could imagine what that's like.*

Except for one part I couldn't wrap my head around at all: Why had she hatched a plan to hurt Richard? Or rather, why was she a co-conspirator in that plan?

I put down my tea after one sip and waited for Richard to continue. His slight smile was all business. After a pause to let me calm down, he picked up the thread of the story again.

"Before we proceed much further, I should outline the relationship Deborah and I had with Octavia."

"Oh, right. That would make it easier for me to follow along."

I gave Richard an uncertain smile back. I had known this would be a heavy topic to discuss, but I had never expected it to be this dark.

As if unaware of my inner turmoil—no, I'm sure he knew how uncomfortable I was—Richard carried on with the story in an unhurried manner.

"We met Octavia just a few months post-accident. She was around ten at the time. The Claremont and Manorland families had a tenuous relationship at best, so Deborah and I were rather surprised when the job offer arrived through our university. I would imagine we were expected to play the role of outside figures in Octavia's life…counselors, of sorts."

"Knowing you, I'm sure you fit the bill."

Ignoring that comment, Richard told me his first impression of Octavia: She was, he said, a silent geyser.

"A what?"

"She was as still and silent as a pool of water, apart from her occasional eruptions. At such times, her joy, rage, or sadness would overwhelm her, but apart from that, she existed in a fugue state. She was like a doll whose name was 'emptiness.'"

"I remember you saying that phrase before…"

"Do you now?"

"Sort of. It's not something I want to dwell on."

I meant that I remembered it all too easily—when I was sick in bed in the hotel after the showdown with my biological father. My memories from that time were all fuzzy. I didn't really remember who I saw or what was said between us, so as kind of an inside joke, I dubbed that my "nothingness period." Once I said that to Richard, he made a pained face and said I'd just confirmed his suspicions. I really was a…well, that. Ever since, I stopped using the term "nothingness period" out loud.

I really was a…

What even was a doll named emptiness? Surely a *thing* in human form, staring off into space, eyes open, seeing nothing. Ears pricked, hearing nothing. Its mouth would be physically capable of taking in food but would register no taste. It could hold up its end

of a conversation if prompted, but it would have no memory of any words spoken or received. That was what it meant to exist in a state of nothingness.

And then, when something set the doll off, the tears would begin to flow. Maybe the doll would find a TV show hysterically funny or become a slave to its own irrational rage. Like a geyser—silent apart from its occasional eruptions.

That was an odd period in my life. Looking back at it now, I recognized that it was my mind resting and recovering, yet when I was in the thick of it, I had no inkling of that. As an empty doll, I couldn't think or feel. I couldn't take stock of the situation; I wasn't cognizant of the passage of time. I could do nothing but be borne along by it, tumbling in the flow as I was swept off to the future.

I couldn't have been luckier than to have had people with me who took care of me when I was in that state: Richard, Jeffrey, Hiromi, Mr. Nakata. Tanimoto, who worked everything out with my college for me, Shimomura, who knew what was going on and gave me some space.

I wondered if Octavia had any people like that. I would have imagined that Richard and Deborah offered her such support, but beyond them...was there anyone else?

I asked Richard, and he responded with an offhand remark: She had servants. Meaning people whom Octavia paid to take care of her—people who were expected to play a different role, one based on efficiency. Not pillars of support built from love and friendship.

Without warning, I felt a rush of the loneliness the ten-year-old Octavia must have felt.

Given that Richard and Deborah were nice people, Octavia must have started to look up to them as a second set of parents. As she began to show signs of recovery, she would have become invested in attending their wedding. I still didn't know the details of Richard's relationship with Deborah, but I gathered that graduate students in England were more "adult" than their Japanese counterparts. British graduate schools seemed to have lots of married couples, and it wasn't uncommon for couples to attend the

same school in different courses. In England, graduate school was a place people went to chase their dreams.

Then there was the fiasco over Richard's inheritance. His engagement ended, he fled the country, and both he and Deborah vanished from Octavia's life. Once again, she was alone.

"I dare say the end of our engagement hit Octavia harder than either Deborah or me. I kick myself for it now, but in the aftermath, I simply didn't have the energy to worry about her emotional needs. I wrote to her, if memory serves, but I could not tell her anything of detail for fear of being pursued. I'm sure my letter was cold comfort. Most likely, she took it as a sign that our friendship had ended for good."

Richard's situation was complicated. It wasn't something anyone outside his family could help with—kind of like a natural disaster. That was why I wholeheartedly wanted to be on Richard's side now.

Even so, I couldn't begin to imagine how hard it must have been on Octavia. What could Richard have even told her? "You've lost two sets of loved ones, twice, before even reaching adulthood. But such is life. Chin up, now; there's a good girl."

If someone I loved said that to me, I would have wanted to murder them in cold blood. Then I would have wanted to die for thinking something so horrible.

No—even if Richard hadn't said anything at all, I was sure Octavia had felt just as bad as I did in that imaginary scenario. If I were in her shoes, what would have I done? How would I have handled the *second* enormous loss of my life? Revert to being the empty doll? But that didn't sound feasible to me. Even if I were to be hurt and lose control of myself again, I wouldn't have been the same person as I was during the hotel part of my life. I had already been there and done that. Our rational brains kick in when we return to past experiences. When those experiences are so damaging that they fall outside of the scope of the rational, emotions take over. The only way to recover was to go on a King Kong-style rampage and destroy everything…or at least, that was how it felt to me.

Maybe…that was why…Octavia chose to take revenge on Richard.

I shared this hypothesis with Richard in those slow, intermittent chunks. He listened, but he didn't respond. It felt like he was telling me to keep thinking it over.

"Well, hmm… It's weird. If my theory is right, then Octavia's revenge is her expressing the feeling 'I loved you, so how could you do this to me?' But if so, why would she force you to take that cruise with that man?"

"It is precisely because she loves me that she wants me to suffer."

"No, that can't be it."

I knew it was overstepping, but I felt that I partially understood how Octavia felt. Not completely—I wouldn't have gone that far. However, I knew the call to violence so innately that it hurt me. It was the desire to destroy this thing that I loved. Because what was the point of loving? What good did it ever do to me to care?

Unfortunately, that love was never an external object. The love came from the heart. This desire to destroy was the urge to rip one's own heart to shreds. Similarly, no one else could be the wreaker of destruction. It had to be you, yourself.

Octavia's plan didn't feel right to me. I couldn't wrap my head around sitting back and letting someone *else* destroy the object of my love. That wouldn't have done anything to express the unbearable rage I felt. As much as it pained me to consider it, I would rather have called Richard up, slapped him across the face, and then bashed my own head in with a rock.

"So then…why?"

"Perhaps her revenge is for another reason altogether."

"Perhaps?"

"Suppose this is not an expression of fury but her response to having someone new to care about her."

Huh? What did he mean by that? Did he mean hypothetically, like after she lost him and Deborah—

No. Not hypothetically. So who was it? Or rather, who sought her out? Who was this person who befriended her?

Oh.

“In my absence, it appears the Claremont family butler and associated staff succeeded in sliding into her life.”

Sliding. That didn’t sound pretty. Negative nuance or no, it meant Octavia knew that Richard had gone into hiding because of his family’s complicated situation. Why, then, did she willingly cooperate with them?

My face twisted in confusion, and Richard sighed before continuing his story. I wondered if he was all right. Maybe this was the right time for me to bring the pudding out from the fridge.

“I would imagine that, at first, the butler and staff found an unsympathetic ear in Octavia. I find it impossible to believe she trusted them, and I doubt they were keen to forge any sort of emotional relationship with her. Their aim was purely business.”

A business relationship with a teenage girl. In Japan, we would have called that exploitation of a minor—adults currying favor with a child under the guise of being their guardian, without actually fulfilling the guardian role. Exploitation was exploitation, even in England or Switzerland, and I could tell Richard felt the same as I did. However, it was all said and done. There was no point in me getting angry over it at this stage.

“Their aim is to recoup the false gemstones that my grandmother Leah once disseminated. They have until the current earl, Lord Godfrey, passes away to complete their work.”

Here was the old story about Leah once more. Her tale was not a modern one—she sent her false gems far and wide around the time of WWII. But old as the crime was, the resultant problems were still plaguing us today.

To solidify her place in high society after immigrating from Sri Lanka, Leah used her knowledge of gemstones to help people with all kinds of problems. For example, she had been known to buy counterfeits of high-quality gemstones at full price as an unobtrusive way to make money change hands. For those who needed real gems and had no money, she would sell real stones at

ridiculously low prices and claim they were counterfeit. The reverse, of course, would have been scummy. But by going to these extraordinary lengths, Leah gained an invisible power in London high society. This was a boon to her husband, the eighth Earl of Claremont, who personally wanted less and less to do with high society.

To this day, the Claremont estate kept records of her secret business transactions, the wellspring of Leah's power. This, unfortunately, had created an issue for the current generation of Claremonts. Or, more precisely, the butlers. Among the staff who ran the affairs of the Claremont household, the butlers were responsible for managing schedules, advising the lord of the house in assorted matters, and other similar responsibilities. The title of earl was now on the cusp of changing hands, as the ninth Earl of Claremont, Richard's uncle, was tragically on his deathbed. Richard told me that once his cousin Henry became the tenth earl, the inheritance would be subjected to a major tax audit. In Japan terms, that was like an audit right in the middle of the chaos of a major company buyout.

The records of Leah's illicit transactions were damning enough. Worse, plenty of people had indirectly received fake jewels from her and fallen in love with them, believing them to be real. If only there was a way to sweep it all under the rug or make it all right...

Selling fake jewels was effectively committing fraud. Leah had lived less than one hundred years ago, so the statute of limitations had yet to apply. While she had already passed away and couldn't be penalized, I shuddered to think of the fines that would be imposed on her descendants. If nothing else, there would be a fine to pay the tax department for falsifying records.

The Claremont family had a sizable set of financial assets, so I assumed they *could* pay it off. It wouldn't bankrupt them. Richard agreed with me, but the butlers hated the idea. It would have tarnished the family's image. Jeffrey had once joked their image wasn't worth defending, what with all the racists. But the butlers were serious.

To me, Leah's Sri Lankan origin was just a fact, but to the British nobility, a bride's birthplace was reason enough to turn up their noses at a whole family. That held true, even in the twenty-first century, and the butlers knew it. Maybe they didn't want the family's name to be "sullied" any further. With Leah's son, Lord Godfrey, in such poor shape, the butlers didn't want to give him any further cause for grief. The chain of command was broken, and the Claremont staff were all but running amok.

Such was Jeffrey's take on the situation, at any rate. Henry thought so, too—the brothers were sharing information with each other now.

If that were true, I wondered why the butlers failed to consider the stress they were causing the lord's sons and nephew? Why had they taken their current approach?

"So you're saying the butlers' so-called business relationship with Octavia is them making her a scapegoat? They want you guys to be mad at her, not them, when they force you to re-collect the jewels. They understand that you would never hurt Octavia, so they're using her own anger as a shield."

"So it would seem."

"...In polite terms, I think those people are off their rocker."

"I would agree. Most maddening of all, there is nothing I could have done to stop this."

The word *butler* evoked for me—a Japanese person—an image of an elderly gentleman utterly devoted to the care and happiness of his master. I knew this was fantasy and nothing more, but I still couldn't picture a butler as someone who ordered their employer around. Richard told me the reality was much more of a business relationship, but even so, I couldn't reconcile my understanding of the word with the actions of the Claremont butlers.

"What they're doing is heartless!"

"Again, I would agree. However, I dare say having a heart means little and less when considering matters of prestige."

Prestige. The word was used frequently in English, but its Japanese counterpart—*meiyo*—had an old-fashioned ring to it. It

sounded kind of hoity-toity, being associated with rumors, donations of large sums of money, and whatnot.

Incidentally, “rumors” made me think of the English phrase “or so they say.” Quite literally, it meant “those people say such-and-such thing,” but it functioned more like the phrase “or so I am told.” There’s a rumor; there’s hearsay; there’s talk that comes not from me or any of my close circle. That kind of thing.

In a sense, preserving prestige was about controlling what “they” said. It required maintaining a perfect facade. A facade left no room for personal feelings to exist. Weakness was weakness and strength was strength. A single rumor was enough to crack any amount of prestige.

In the twenty-first century, being an aristocrat was kind of like being prestige concentrated. It was not quite unlike antique jewelry in that preservation meant everything. In order to preserve the family’s perceived value, any slippage—any crack or fissure in the facade—was unacceptable. Maybe the butlers of the Claremont family were trying to prevent a potential crack from forming. It reminded me of corporate image management.

Speaking of which…I’d heard that Gargantua, the group whose board featured the man who did those terrible things to Richad on the cruise ship, was facing an image crisis after its sexual harassment lawsuit. But that was something else entirely.

“Protecting prestige at the cost of real, flesh-and-blood people… That doesn’t sound very prestigious to me.”

“That is precisely why we had to wait for your appearance before they would release the will.”

“Oh.”

“Some, it would seem, see the value in playing both sides. If not, I’m sure this someone I shan’t name would have burned the Claremont house down, along with its safe, long ago.”

Richard’s words were heavy. No one in the Claremont household had been in a position to help Richard, the inheritor of the so-called diamond. The best they could do was remind him of the gem he would earn if he married an appropriate spouse, so why not get married and be done with it?

And then the paths Deborah and Richard walked had diverged.

Richard, sensing the tension in the air, stopped abruptly and stood up.

“I expect another message from Jeffrey at any minute. Let us wait for him.”

“Oh, okay.”

Not long after, our pleasant tea party was interrupted when Richard’s phone began vibrating. He glanced at the caller ID, turned on the speaker with a practiced gesture, and listened as a familiar voice emanated from the phone.

Jeffrey’s tone was noticeably lower than its usual chipper self. *“Hey there, guys. What have you eaten today, Seigi?”*

“That was random. Um, let me see. My Nakata special pudding, leftover omelet rice, and a little bit of stew.”

“I wish that were me. All I’ve had was a quick snack bar. I wish I could come hang out with you folks—well, I say that as if I’m not on my way already.”

I figured he was on his way. Of course, Jeffrey wasn’t coming to sample my famous pudding but to see the girl currently on her way to Sri Lanka—to us—by private jet. Octavia.

It was a momentous occasion. She hadn’t left her house since the accident in the snowstorm. Who knew when she would next decide to step foot in the outside world? Not like she had much of a choice this time, though.

Jeffrey, Richard’s self-proclaimed older brother figure, had been another one of my caretakers during my time spent as an empty doll. He seemed to have more energy than even Richard, who worked in Ginza on the weekends before flying overseas during the week to conduct business. Jeffrey spent his days rushing to all corners of the map as the face and personality of the large investment firm he worked for. I once assumed he was in the field of IR—investor relations, waiting on the firm’s best customers—but his business card claimed he had a slightly different role. Jeffrey had hinted at having more decision-making power in the firm, but I didn’t know all the details, even now.

“What new information do you have for us, Jeff?”

“Right now? Nothing. Judging from her itinerary, Octavia is still in the air. I’ve made a few plans of my own, and it looks like I’ll just beat her to the Sri Lankan Bandaranaike International Airport.”

Made sense. Perhaps fortunately, Bandaranaike was the only international airport in Sri Lanka. It was just outside of Colombo and bustled with traffic. An overseas visitor to Japan could have just as easily flown into Kansai International as Narita, but we didn’t have that luxury here.

Kandy, the small city where Richard and I lived, was a few hours by car from Bandaranaike. That gave us time to prepare for Jeffrey and Octavia’s arrival. Richard used that time to brief me on Octavia and the Claremont butlers, but now I regretted it. The tension in the room was so thick, I could have cut it with a knife.

I would have distracted myself by petting Jiro, the mutt I had fallen in love with here in Sri Lanka…but, it being ten o’clock at night, Jiro had long since sprawled out on the mattress on the floor and gone to sleep. I wanted to avoid the horror of him glaring at me, his face demanding, “Master, do you even know what *time* it is?”

My mind stopped wandering when I heard Jeffrey speak again. He didn’t sound very confident, and I immediately wanted to know why.

“So, uh, this isn’t set in stone yet… Oh, sorry. Hold on.”

Jeffrey broke out into a violent coughing fit on the other end of the line. It didn’t sound like something got stuck in his throat—if anything, he sounded hoarse.

“Have you caught a cold?”

“No, I’m fine. I’m just worn out.”

Worn out? In what sense?

“Jeffrey, I think you should get some rest.”

Jeffrey didn’t answer me. Richard feigned indifference, but I could easily tell that he was worried.

To lighten the mood, I tried to do a bit. I adopted a New York accent I once heard in a foreign TV show and asked, “Hey, you good?”

Jeffrey laughed, though it sounded more like a disappointed sigh. *“I didn’t know you were part New Yorker.”*

He spoke with such affection that I was taken aback. I fell silent for a moment before Jeffrey cleared his throat and said, *“Uh, never mind. Anyway, it’s still up in the air, but there’s something you need to know about Henry.”*

Jeffrey really must not have been feeling well if his quip fell that flat.

Richard immediately prompted for more information, a note of worry creeping into his voice. I almost couldn’t tell who sounded more anxious when Jeffrey admitted, *“Henry insisted on coming along.”*

“To where?”

“Sri Lanka. He’s packing and heading our way as we speak. I tried talking him out of it, but he wouldn’t listen to reason. Maybe you’ll have better luck. You may be able to call and catch him on his way out the door.”

What? Richard and I exchanged baffled glances.

Jeffrey groaned. *“Well, looks like the gang will be all back together soon. Funny, since we’ll see each other again when Father passes. Maybe it’s better this way, since the house is chaos right now. Getting away might be the smartest move.”*

Jeffrey mentioned his father passing offhand, but I was baffled and amazed by his initiative and kindness in wrapping up work, obtaining Octavia’s flight itinerary, and placing an international call to us, all with a close relative on the verge of death. Jeffrey had never been able to stop caring for Richard, even when he acted like Richard’s adversary. Now, with that long behind us, Jeffrey was every inch the kind older brother to us both.

It almost felt like he was trying to make amends for an unforgivable crime. Honor—prestige, even—really was a funny thing.

“Jeff.” There was usually a slightly stern, if joking, tone in Richard’s voice when he addressed his cousin, but now Richard was perfectly warm.

“Yeah?”

“Go sleep. Now.”

“FYI, I already slept. Besides, I’m in a taxi on my way to the airport. I’ll catch some extra Zs once I’m in the air.”

“Take a nap in the taxi, then. You sound like a sleep-muddled ox.”

“An ox? I always thought I was more of a stubborn old goat. Very well, Richard! There’s no arguing with you. I will be a good boy and go to sleep.”

“Indeed. Farewell, then.”

“Righty-o. Adieu*.”*

The line went dead following that playful touch of French. Had Jeffrey been in full form, he would have teased Richard further. Not today, though.

Richard immediately picked up the phone once more and placed a call to someone else. Saul? Oh, no. Not Saul. My mouth went dry the second I saw the name of the caller.

The phone rang for a long time before Richard turned the speaker off and lifted his cell to his ear.

“Henry? It is good to speak with you again.”

Henry Claremont. The future Earl of Claremont and the man responsible for Jeffrey turning against Richard. Yet as it turned out, Henry was nothing but a helpless victim of fate, a plaything of powers much larger than him. He struggled with depression, although he was on the road to recovery. Henry was also, incidentally, a jam session buddy for my friend Haruyoshi. I hadn’t told Richard…yet. I didn’t know how to bring it up.

Richard and Henry spoke to one another in calm, quiet English. Henry didn’t speak Japanese. He and Haruyoshi connected because Henry felt lonely as the sole member of the Claremont trio who didn’t speak this language.

Richard spoke to Henry with more patience and better manners than he ever used on me in English. I had no difficulty following the conversation, even without straining my ears to eavesdrop.

Why was Henry going to Sri Lanka, asked Richard. His tone wasn't accusatory, simply curious. He was concerned about Henry's well-being and the very real possibility of Henry's father passing away in his absence. Japanese has the idiom "I can't bear to watch my parents die," but the grief of losing a loved one transcends borders.

Richard took care to ask in a roundabout fashion, so as not to be rude, if Henry was serious about coming and if this trip would hurt his mental health.

There was silence as Henry put his thoughts in order. Richard waited a good fraction of a minute before the owner of the other quiet voice spoke at length.

"I…need to do something. If I sit around and do nothing, I will never change. But I want to. I want to change. I've spent my whole life worrying over what to do and never taking action. That's why, this time around, I need to step up and do something."

His pronunciation was crisp; his words easy to parse. It was odd. For a man born and raised in England, his faltering sentences made it sound like he wasn't fluent in the language. All the same, his words rang with honesty and sincerity. Maybe speaking English with someone with a poor grasp of the language had helped restore his conversational skills.

Richard closed his eyes in thought for several seconds before he finally said, "I see." That was, effectively, him acknowledging that Henry was on his way.

However, at the last moment, Richard tacked on one extra question: "What of the earl?"

"…It will be fine. Richard, please. Trust my judgment. It will…"

…It will all be fine, said Henry once more.

As the one who lived in the Claremont mansion alongside the ailing earl, Henry was obviously the best-equipped to comment on the earl's health. If he said everything would be all right, there was nothing for Richard to say but "Very well."

There, the conversation ended. Richard sighed without a word.

I ladled out the last tea in the pot and offered it to Richard. He accepted it with a smile, but before he could take a drink, his phone

rang again.

Who now, I wondered. Had Henry forgotten to add something? But it wasn't Henry. The caller ID said someone else altogether.

Cup still in hand, Richard tapped the phone and turned the speaker on again.

"Jeff?"

"Sorry for calling back a third time."

"Must I remind you—"

"Yes, yes, you told me to sleep. However, I have another piece of breaking news. We're about to take off, so let me tell you now before I need to turn off my phone."

The subject of this breaking news? Octavia's destination. The content? Shocking. Octavia was not headed for Bandaranaike International Airport. Which meant… What did it mean?

"Then I take it we shall not see her in Sri Lanka?"

"No, sorry for my confusing wording. She is still going to Sri Lanka, but her *final* destination's not Bandaranaike. It looks like she plans to switch planes at BIA."

So, she was heading to a smaller airport afterward? That meant her final stop was somewhere beyond the Colombo area. Colombo was too close to the airport. So she could be, I thought, flying into somewhere much closer to Kandy.

Jeffrey must have sensed how I tensed up, because he was quick to shoot me down. *"No, no. She's going to Nuwara Eliya."*

"Wait, what?"

"She already has a reservation. She's going to Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka's number one city for mountain resorts and tea production— that's *her final stop. She's staying at the Grand Hotel. Isn't that funny? She came all the way from Europe just to stay there."*

I didn't quite understand that last part, but Richard responded with an affirmative. He almost ended the call there, but Jeffrey wasn't done.

"There's more. According to the info I just got, Octavia planned to make three stops and take her sweet time to get to Sri Lanka. However,

in light of the most recent news, I looked up her flight plan. It's changed."

"It's now," Jeffrey said, *"a direct flight. A* direct *flight, Ricky."*

Which meant it would only take as long as any other flight from Europe to Sri Lanka. How long was that, though? I pulled up an app on my phone that showed me flight times. With a few taps on the globe, the app would tell you how long it took to fly from Point A to Point B. Richard called it a lifesaver.

Twelve hours, the app said. Half a day. *When did Octavia leave Switzerland again? How many hours ago was that? Wait, would she be landing any minute now?* Richard and I hadn't had the time to waste after all.

The update didn't startle Richard, but he could say nothing in response. Jeffrey sighed, like he could see the expression on Richard's face.

"She played us good, Ricky. I guess she really is feeling better. All righty, then. Can I trust you to handle this? I'll be there soon. Where should I meet you?"

"Let's say Colombo. There is a train we can take."

"You got it. I'll leave you to buy us all tickets, and I've sent you my landing time in the app. See you soon."

"Jeff?"

"Yeah?"

"I understand you may find it difficult to sleep despite my admonitions otherwise, but at the very least, it would do you good to give yourself a moment to breathe. Take care not to overtax yourself."

"...Sorry, what was that? You're breaking up. At any rate, I'll see you in twelve hours. Till then!"

I heard a sharp inhale, like a sniffle, just before the call disconnected.

I didn't know what to say for a while. It wasn't just the Octavia thing. Jeffrey was running himself ragged on our behalf. Like a rat scurrying through a scientist's maze or a point P traveling at high speeds, Jeffrey single-handedly ran about collecting information

and sharing it with us. Why was that his job? Well, it was obvious. Even I understood that he was perfect for the task.

But what motivated him to do this for us?

“Hey, Richard?”

“Yes?”

“Why does Jeffrey…pretend like you don’t care about him whenever you try to look out for him?”

I couldn’t put it into words well, but it was true: Jeffrey didn’t accept kindness from Richard. He happily complained about Richard’s chilly treatment, but he refused to accept Richard being less frigid. It was almost as if Jeffrey didn’t think he *deserved* better treatment.

With a light shrug of his shoulders, Richard remarked, “I suppose he wants to make up for what he’s done. He still refuses to accept that he is as affected by our family’s curse as Henry or me. Jeffrey is convinced that he should have either taken it upon himself to solve the problem or left it alone entirely. A subset of a messiah complex, as it were. Nothing of much import.”

“…If I were you, I would be way more aggressive about being nice to him. Wouldn’t that fix your relationship faster?”

“And would you have me tell him that he had no other choice? Should I tell him I am no longer angry at him?”

Richard’s tone was harsh. The moment he spoke, I felt like I had swallowed a dark, heavy stone. I shook my head, shut up, and bowed in apology.

Richard smiled once more, but there was no life in it. “No, don’t misunderstand me. I *am* no longer upset. My life was upended not because of Jeffrey but because of the things that drove him to act. I no longer harbor anger for what he chose to do, but if I were to tell him that…”

Then what, Richard asked, would Jeffrey do with his guilt?

If a lack of anyone blaming you was painful, how could that pain be defined? How painful would it be? Which would be worse: universal blame or no blame at all? Neither, I thought. Pain was subjective. If pain could be quantified and compared, there would have been so much less suffering in the world.

My worst fear was that if Richard one day decided to take a page out of my book and tell Jeffrey all wrongs were forgiven, Jeffrey might simply say, “Okay,” smile his ever-present, cheerful, brotherly smile, and accept it. Neither he nor Richard would ever broach the subject again. Jeffrey would keep looking out for us, still smiling that brotherly smile—and he would be alone in pretending that it had never happened.

It sounded horrible. Too lonely to bear. This subject was one that deserved to be broached again and again. I imagined that Richard agreed. Rather than arbitrarily call this important topic water under the bridge, it was Jeffrey who remained aware of how unforgivable his crimes had been. It was like Jeffrey had bottled up this poison within him, and by forcing him to keep those memories alive, Richard was pouring an antidote into the bottle’s mouth.

Even so…

“Richard, you and your brothers—well, no, your—”

“Cousins, yes. But close enough to brothers to count.”

“Right. What I meant is, you, Jeffrey, and Henry are all very kind.”

Each in their own ways, but kind nonetheless. They each had the same warmth, like cookies cut into different shapes but made from the same batch of batter. So, too, did they share the same loneliness. Maybe kindness and loneliness were two sides of the same coin.

The beautiful jeweler in front of me turned his head over his shoulder to give me a slightly haughty look I hadn’t seen him make in some time. It was so beautiful, it made me giddy, but I recognized that now wasn’t the time to tell him that.

“One must be more than kind to survive. Have you forgotten that gemstones must be three things: hard, treatable, *and* beautiful? When you claim we are kind, you mustn’t forget that we have just as much hidden strength. The English nobility are all descendants of the strong men of a wild and war-loving people.”

“So, strong, beautiful, and kind?”

“It is charitable of you to say so. Now then, let us turn to other matters.”

“Right. We have to get ready. We must suit up for battle!”

“No, I was going to suggest we be off to bed. We will begin work first thing tomorrow.”

Jeffrey wouldn’t be here for another six hours, and it was still dark outside. We would need to see if I could leave Jiro with the neighbor, then drive four hours to Colombo, park the car at a house Saul owned, head to the Colombo central train station, and buy tickets. All the enthusiasm in the world meant nothing when it was in the middle of the night. Sleep it was. Anything to be refreshed and rejuvenated for tomorrow’s battle.

“Hey, Richard?”

“Yes?”

Richard looked at me. The whites of his blue eyes shone like crystals in the dim room.

“I…hope everything will turn out all right.”

I had begun to ask *if* it would turn out all right—and I really did seek that reassurance from him. I had a bad feeling everything was about to go wrong. However, once I used my brain, I realized Richard must have been just as worried as me. Even if he was as beautiful as an angel or some other divine being, he was, in the end, an ordinary person just like me.

Richard smiled and nodded. “Yes. As do I.”

Maybe it was a shared prayer. Maybe it was a mutual reassurance. But whatever it was, after that brief exchange, we went about our respective bedtime routines. Going to bed was our only and best option, because sleep was the most crucial thing at a time like this.

On the mattress, a low growl rose from the dreaming Jiro’s throat.

The Second Day

NUWARA ELIYA could have been a tongue twister, but for anyone who lived in Sri Lanka, it was a household name. Plenty of conversations went like this: If you could go anywhere, where would you go? Hmm, probably Nuwara Eliya. Where do these tea leaves come from? Nuwara Eliya. You're going golfing? Where? Yup, Nuwara Eliya.

When I first heard it, I misunderstood it as a place named Nuwara—that is, a Nuwara *area*. In an old Sri Lankan language, *Nuwara* was "city" and *eliya* was, according to some, "shining." Thus, "shining city." Nuwara Eliya. This was also the name of a district, but most people meant the district capital when they mentioned Nuwara Eliya. The city sat high in the mountains and maintained low temperatures year-round, even in summer. Nights could be chilly. People said it was the perfect place to go to beat the summer heat.

It was also a six-hour train ride from Colombo. A long trip, said the man at the Colombo ticket counter. But, he added with a smile, one we would never get our fill of.

He wasn't wrong. Our sky-blue train car zigzagged across a lush green landscape as it gradually climbed into the hills. At first, the view was that of the typical Sri Lankan jungle, but as we went along, the scenery changed completely.

Tea plantations.

Tea plantations as far as the eye could see.

Tea plantations rising up the slopes in terraces.

Plantations full of shining, fresh, new leaves.

An endless procession of tea plantations.

A woman who looked like a tourist shot photos of the fields from her enormous SLR camera. It looked like a gun. She had blonde hair and blue eyes and wore a black tank top and sandals. The woman sat on the floor of the train with her feet dangling off the edge outside the car. No one tried to stop that dangerous behavior. The train car doors didn't even snap shut; anyone could simply push them open. Back in Japan, that would have been inconceivable. If she fell, she could be injured, or even die if she hit

something wrong on the way down. Still, it probably wasn't that big of a deal. She wasn't going to fall.

Tea fields scrolled past my window nearly without end.

Tea fields, tea fields, an occasional colorful Hindu temple, more tea fields.

The unbroken stretch of green made me feel dizzy, so I went back to my seat. There was a television—a surprising luxury on a Sri Lankan train—on the wall of this first-class car, which played, oddly enough, a Hollywood film with Korean subtitles. When I once took a train back to Kandy from Colombo on a rainy day, water gushed through the cracks between the walls and the windows. When I propped my chin on my hand and leaned against the wall, my sleeve got soaked. However, I doubted I would have the same problem on this train. It was headed for one of Sri Lanka's top vacation spots, and I could perceptibly feel that a much larger sum of money had been invested in it—the lack of closing doors aside.

The doors weren't the problem. The problem was…

Richard looked over at me as I massaged the spot between my eyebrows. "Is something wrong? Have you had enough of taking photos?"

"No, I was just…thinking about what a 'plantation'"—I said that in English—"really is."

"It seems a 'bravo' is in order."

"That's not English, but *san kyuu*."

As I stared at the unending sea of monocrop fields, it hit me like a bolt from the blue: None of the tea went to the people who lived there.

When I lived near the Kanto Plain, just outside of Tokyo, I was guaranteed a view of farmland—endless rice paddies, small shrines, and the static image of farmers in their fields—not far from the city. There were homes in that farmland, always. I could just tell the farms belonged to the people who lived there, and they always, always featured homes. Japan lacked the sprawl of farmland that America had, the kind so big that they needed airplanes to spray the whole fields down with pesticides. In Japan, farms and homes went hand in hand.

These tea plantations, though, had no homes on them at all. Just fields. Endless fields. No matter how far we went, we saw nothing but an unbroken stretch of fields.

Ridges and furrows radiated out on both sides of the tracks in straight lines. If I followed one of those lines with my eyes, I never saw any variation that suggested a neighbor's field or any sort of border to these plots of land. These fields were operated on a macroscopic level. Anything that was not a field was just jungle. There were no houses, and not even any spaces that a weary farmer might use to sit and rest.

That's what told me these fields were not cultivated by the ancestors of the land's inhabitants. These were large-scale plantations—places planned to have endless fields for large numbers of incoming workers and jumbled housing for them to return to at the end of the day. These farms did not exist for their workers. The workers, in fact, were considered as nothing more than another part of the farm.

The meaning of the English word *plantation* sank in as the train rolled along: colonial-era, large-scale farms that grew nothing but luxury products to be sold overseas at high prices. I'd first learned the word in junior high social studies class. Plantations worked in tandem with colonial states, with the colonies' plantations producing agriculture for the good of the colonizer. It was trade that benefited only the foreign power. Traditional agriculture, sustainable land use—none of that mattered to plantation owners.

Sri Lanka was once a colony of England, I knew, which explained the presence of white people like Leah on an island of mostly non-white individuals. This was also how places like the reservoir in Kandy came by English names such as Victoria Reservoir.

I had to admit that I really never thought all that much about Sri Lanka apart from the places I lived. I had never even put much thought into Sri Lanka's principal export, tea, the phenomenon that came from China.

"You are frowning again."

"Oh. Sorry."

“We have yet to even arrive at the first battleground. Relax and save your strength. Look at him.”

“Him” was a sleeping man wearing a white face mask, a black eye mask, earplugs, a blanket, a thick pair of slippers, and a knitted cap. He snored away in a business class seat, his face completely obscured. He was Jeffrey.

As if all his talk over the phone of being worried was a lie, Jeffrey showed up in Sri Lanka without so much as a carry-on bag, took one step into the train car, announced he was going to sleep, burrowed into a cocoon of cloth, and began recharging. I wondered how on Earth I was ever going to wake him up, but I was still glad he was getting rest. Now, after three hours on the train, I no longer even cared about the odd glances people passing down the aisle threw at him.

“You should aspire to rest with as much brazen confidence as him.”

“...I’ll think about it.”

“There is nothing to think about. You are prone to overthinking these days as it is.”

“Not,” he added in a jocular tone, “that a little overthinking is a bad thing.” He cracked a smile at me. His joke made me feel better, if a little apologetic. Of all of us, the one dealing with the most emotional turmoil must have been Octavia’s former tutor. Richard.

Before this incarnation of beauty and kindness could read too much into my silence, I began to babble.

“C-can I ask a question? This area is full of tea plantations, right? From the British colonial era? So...before Sri Lanka became a British colony, what used to grow here?”

“Nothing. These didn’t used to be fields.”

“Really?”

“Yes. If anything, I would hazard a guess that very few people lived here at all.”

“Huh. I see.”

“These mountains are too steep for the pre-colonial residents of Sri Lanka to have done much cultivating of the land.”

This reminded me: Nuwara Eliya was up in the mountains. To compare it to Japan, Richard said, Nuwara Eliya was like Hakone, an area in Kanagawa famous for its mountains and volcanoes. Sure enough, the train kept climbing and climbing, sometimes making my ears pop. It was easy to imagine how difficult clearing this land was.

But then that raised the simple question: Who made these fields?

I doubted the English colonials had brought laborers with them from England. My understanding was that the British forced the local populations to perform work, building factories to produce cheap clothes at low labor costs. But then why the puzzling lack of homes?

“Seigi, are you familiar with the concept of relocating individuals for forced labor?”

“Uh, yes, but I don’t see why that matt—ohh.”

“The British Empire did not govern Sri Lanka, nor its neighbor, India, during the colonial period. In fact, it was the East India Company. What do you know of this entity?”

“Not much. Just that it’s ‘the Company’ that ran the colonies.”

I once saw a political cartoon depicting Queen Victoria envying the owner of the East India Trading Company. It meant the company was wealthier than the Crown. The average Japanese high school education didn’t touch on it much, but even so, I could tell the East India Trading Company did whatever it wanted when it was at the height of its power.

“Very well. Then I shall inform you. A company exists to seek profit. Should it suffer a shortage of labor, it thinks nothing of bringing in labor from any available source. The closer, the better, certainly. That is how companies think.”

The people the East India Company employed to pick tea leaves largely came from Southern India—Tamils. The Company then gave the Tamils power to oversee the native Sinhalese, causing tension between the two ethnic groups and redirecting anger from the ruling East India Trading Company. Divide and conquer, as the saying went.

Now I understood the complex Sri Lankan race relations much better. This was a good thing, even if the facts themselves were nothing to celebrate.

"...But I love tea."

"The tea is not to blame."

"I know..."

I imagined the colonial English, the ones who had benefited from the East India Trading Company and developed the custom of afternoon tea, thought to themselves, "Tea? A delicious drink," and let the conversation end there. Things were different in the past. It wasn't until the twenty-first century that anyone could go online and tell the world over video that they were a victim of labor trafficking. In a time with no internet, not even radio, how could anyone know what was going on overseas?

The East India Company was founded in the year 1600 and dissolved in the mid-1800s during the major Indian rebellion of the nineteenth century. That was a long time for a company to last. While the Tokugawa shogunate ruled Japan, the Sri Lankans were forced to grow crops for the Europeans.

But the tea plantations didn't fall with the Company. They still operated to this day.

And they made for such beautiful scenery that it depressed me.

"...I shudder to think how you'll react when we reach Nuwara Eliya."

"What?"

"Sleep. Relax while you still have the opportunity."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Richard didn't answer me. He probably didn't think a response was necessary.

Unfortunately, it turned out Richard was right to be concerned for me.

Nuwara Eliya had a golf course. A horse racetrack. A classic post office. It had anything and everything, even though it was a six-hour train ride into the mountains from the former capital of Sri

Lanka. None of it was in native Sri Lankan style. Everything catered to the tastes of those who arrived later.

What a perfect place to get away and beat the summer heat! Say, why don't we build ourselves a golf course? Oh, but we'll get bored with nothing but golf all day. Why don't we get ourselves a racetrack; there's a good chap. And the summer tourists, why, they'll want to send letters to the folks back home, don't you think? We'd best have a post office. Now, what say you and me nip down to the green and putt a few holes?

I didn't have to be Vince to know of a whole genre of video games that played out just like this. God games. Or capitalism simulators. Games where the players developed the land—a fun enough thing to do to an imaginary universe. But did people used to do this in reality? Evidently so, or how else would giant Western-style racetracks and golf courses appear in the mountains of Southern Asia?

I was frozen in the taxi cab all the way to our destination. Jeffrey, sitting in the passenger seat, tried to help. "Relax, Seigi. Relaaax. Nuwara Eliya is a tourist attraction and a major positive contributor to the Sri Lankan economy to this day. Richard would never say it, so I will. There can be a surprising wealth of cultural value left in the wake of even the most violent and one-sided cultural exchanges. Isn't it ironic?"

I would have expected lines like that from a villain. Jeffrey's tone was soft and persuasive, almost begging me to redirect my anger to him. It helped me calm down. This wasn't the right time to be angry about atrocities that occurred three centuries ago. I could direct my righteous indignation at an intangible target, but it did nothing except make me feel good. If anything, it was kind of like spitting on all those who'd lived here for three hundred years.

"...It's okay. I'm fine. Actually, I was thinking about how bad the wealth gap must have been back then. While some people vacationed here, others were out there picking tea."

"Ah ha. I forgot we had an economist in this car."

"Jeff, are you quite aware your eye mask is still dangling about your neck?"

"Whoops. Wasn't intentional. Anyway, we're almost there."

Our destination was thirty minutes away from the train station by taxi. The Grand Hotel. Built in 1819, this very British-inspired hotel was designated a Sri Lankan National Heritage site, which essentially labeled it a sort of Sri Lankan cultural icon. It boasted flower gardens unlike any I had ever seen, all trimmed in an orderly fashion and brimming with Western charm.

However, something was weird. A couple of cars were parked in a perimeter around the hotel. Was there some sort of trouble? Jeffrey hurried out of the taxi to see what was up. When he came back to us, he couldn't stop laughing.

"Amazing, Ricky. She's rented the whole place out for us."

The people creating the commotion at the entrance were, according to Jeffrey, tourists hoping to have tea at the hotel who didn't have reservations. Didn't they know there was an event? *What event?* What event, indeed.

"The hotel workers say the place is closed to all but a select few for four days—or even longer, if need be. Same with the gardens, the shooting range, and the billiard room. The whole hotel is reserved for the use of a single person and her guests. No one else. That's why the staff needs to turn the tourists away. It's like a fortress, one you're not allowed to leave."

As he climbed back into the car, Jeffrey muttered to himself as an afterthought, "She must have beat us here."

Who? I might have thought, but it wasn't a question worth asking. Octavia. This was her doing, wasn't it?

The taxi driver, bewildered, asked what our next move was. "Go in," said Jeffrey. *Go in.* We were, after all, "her guests."

A dark-skinned staff member in a white uniform stood before the gate. He wore a *Not again* look as he walked up to us, but once he saw who sat in the back seat of the car, recognition dawned on his face. He pulled a piece of copy paper out of his breast pocket and compared the photograph to the man next to me. Richard. A beauty so intense, it was daunting—surely there was no authorization permit easier to understand.

The staff member immediately brightened and bent down next to the passenger side window. Jeffrey rolled it down, and the

staff member said to Richard, “Welcome, sirs. We have been expecting you. Do I have the pleasure to address the Misters Richard Claremont, Jeffrey Claremont, and Seigi Nakata?”

“You do indeed.”

“Please come inside. Everything is ready for your stay.”

Ready.

As the car rolled through the hotel gates, I felt that, once again, we were playing right into Octavia’s hands.

We walked through the stunning English garden and a spacious foyer complete with a fireplace. The moment I stepped into the lobby, I caught sight of a familiar figure standing there.

“Hello, Mr. Nakata. It’s me, the one and only Vincent. Surprised?”

“Honestly, no. I figured you would be here.”

“Bah.”

“…Vince.”

“Hey there, Richard. Haven’t seen you since the cruise.”

Vince was dressed smartly today, in accordance with the décor of the classic hotel. His brown hair was slicked back with wax, and he wore a black uniform, like a faithful butler stepping out of a period piece. He even had the perfect finishing touches: a white tie and a pair of gloves. These, too, were probably on Octavia’s instructions.

“Miss Octavia has a message for you two. Follow me, please.”

Ojou—Japanese for “miss.” Vince was on “miss” terms with Octavia?

Before my surprise could fully register, Vince produced the now-familiar tablet and held it up at chest height like he was a robot. It showed an image of a girl, her platinum blonde hair tied up and an amber brooch pinned at her throat. She spoke rapid, fluent English.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Richard, Mr. Nakata, and…the third party who I can only assume must be here. Thank you for traveling such a long way to see me. If I may, I would like to present you with a fun

little game from the host of the party, yours truly. My servant has an envelope for each of you."

As prompted, Vince presented us with two envelopes. We slit them open with our fingers and pulled out a card from each. Both had a single phrase written in beautiful English calligraphy.

The road of—say what now?

"Your envelopes contain invitations to embark down two separate roads. One is the road of gemstones, the other the road of Japanese literature. You shall each explore this hotel, answering riddles related to the road which you have chosen. Mr. Richard, Mr. Nakata, the choice is now in your hands. Do note that each route leads to a different destination."

Sure enough, one card read "the road of gemstones," and the other "the road of Japanese literature." Richard's was the gemstones, whereas I had the Japanese literature.

The handsome man in front of me frowned and turned to his former assistant. "Do we have the option of attempting both roads as a team, one path at a time?"

"That would be a no. That's not how Miss Octavia wants it."

"What if we were to do so in spite of her wishes?"

"You may find some doors will refuse to open for you. That equals game over."

So what was the point in coming this far if Richard and I had to split up no matter what?

Then, my next question: Which would I choose? The road of gemstones or the road of Japanese literature? *Literature, huh...* I was Japanese myself, born and raised, and had even graduated from university in Japan. It was just, well. Japanese literature was...how to put it...

As much as it mortified me to admit, Japanese literature was completely inscrutable to me.

I glanced over at Richard and caught his blue eyes. He stepped closer to me and recited the first three lines of a piece of classic Japanese poetry to me:

“Stepping through the drifts of fallen leaves /deep within the mountains /a deer bugles…?”

It was like a game of *karuta*, where the reader offered the first three lines of a classic poem and required the other person to finish it. Richard spoke the five-seven-five syllable rhythm with such elegance. I wished I could say, “I know that one! Here’s the last two lines.” Oh, how I wished.

“A-all while my sleeves grow heavier /with every falling snowflake?”

“…Spring flees as we stand on summer’s doorstep. /I will put my whitest clothing out to dry?”

“Uh… All while my sleeves…grow heavier /with every falling snowflake?”

“What snowflakes? Surely it isn’t snowing if we stand on summer’s doorstep.”

“Hey, these poems could take place somewhere in the mountains! Like Nuwara Eliya.”

Behind me on one of the couches, Jeffrey roared with laughter. His laughter threshold was awfully low today. Maybe he was tired. Or maybe I was being too much of an idiot. At any rate, that was the sum of an average Japanese citizen’s knowledge of Japanese literature. Or so I thought. So I hoped.

That left me with no other choice. *Urgh.* I had to pick the road of gemstones, as I’m sure Octavia knew all too well.

“Man, what am I to do? Vince, what do you say we go to the bar and have a drink for old time’s sake?”

“Sorry, I’m on duty, but knock yourself out. I wouldn’t recommend anything too strong, what with those dark circles around your eyes. I don’t want you passing out when the nearest hospital is on the other side of the mountain. Besides, we’ve never exactly been drinking buddies.”

“No doubt.” Jeffrey’s smile reeked of a sweet poison. “You and I go way back, and we’ve never shared a drink together.”

Poking at Vince’s old wounds was just cutting himself with a double-edged sword, but Jeffrey still flaunted that strategy. I felt like I had caught a glimpse of the tip of the iceberg that was his pain.

Vince, however, paid Jeffrey no attention. He turned back to Richard and me.

“So, what will it be? I have something different to give you depending on which route you choose. Since I’m the tutorial guy, I’m afraid I’m stuck here until I’m done explaining.”

The boredom was evident on his face, and for a brief moment, I was glad to see that classic Vince look. I flashed him a small smile, and he returned it with an undisguised scowl. That made me even happier.

That aside. “Richard, I’ll…”

Out of nowhere, Richard looked straight at me and recited another poem.

“For you /I’ll go out into the spring fields /and pick you the fresh young shoots.”

“…All while my sleeves grow heavier /with every falling snowflake?”

“Correct.”

It was backward—a card reader devising a question precisely for the player who only knew a single answer. I didn’t even know what the poem was about.

As if Richard knew exactly what I was thinking, the knowledgeable man began to explain. “This is a poem by Emperor Koko, immortalized in both the *Kokinshu* and the *Hyakunin Isshu* poetry collections. It describes a rustic scene of a man picking herbs in a snow-covered field for the Festival of Seven Herbs in the old lunar calendar. It would have been considered spring by historical reckoning.”

“Oh. So that’s what it’s all about.”

“Indeed. One fascinating aspect of this poem is, while the poet himself was a man, it is not known if the titular ‘you’ is a man or a woman. It could be read either way. Some consider it more obvious to assume the speaker is a woman, as she would be the one preparing the greens, but the language also carries a nuance of a man exhausting his every effort for another man he cares greatly for. So yes, Seigi. You chose the correct final lines for this poem.”

The man whose unbroken gaze was fixed on me was not the tender Richard I knew. He was jeweler Richard. Kind to customers, strict on his employees.

In other words, he was encouraging me—telling me to shape up in a way that was pleasing to the ear. I took his words to heart and beamed at Richard. For some reason, I felt happy. Like I was back in university for a moment. *All while my sleeves grow heavier with every falling snowflake.*

"All right. You can count on me. For you, I'll go out into a blizzard in the Himalayas and pick you a bouquet of edelweiss."

"Edelweiss, or *Leontopodium nivale*, does not grow in the Himalayas."

"It's just a metaphor."

"Hmmph."

Richard muttered, "Suit yourself," and wheeled around. The look on his face reminded me of our moments of shared downtime in Sri Lanka, but by the time he had fixed his collar and turned back around, he looked every inch the capable jeweler.

"The Japanese literature for me. For Seigi, the gemstones."

"Yes, sir. Right this way."

Vince handed Richard some kind of key card and a letter. Richard nodded in acknowledgment and turned to give Jeffrey a stern look to behave himself, as Jeffrey rested his elbows on the bar top. Still, for all that, there was incredible kindness in his eyes. Then he strode away into the enormous hotel. This entrance hall alone was enormous enough to hold a ball in. I wondered what lay beyond it.

"All right, Mr. Nakata. That leaves yours."

Vince handed me an identical key card and a label-sized slip of paper with Room 202 printed on it. I gathered I was supposed to go to that room. He turned on his heel with a "See ya," but I stopped him before he could go far.

"Um, hey. Do Richard and I need to avoid each other? Based on what you said earlier, it sounds like we need to solve the riddles on our own."

“I wouldn’t go that far. To be honest, I don’t think you’ll bump into each other at all. You should be able to solve the riddles on your own.”

“Like, by Googling stuff on my phone?”

“Have you not noticed? There’s no cell reception here.”

“Oh, shoot!”

I groaned. Did Octavia really have to go that far?

Vince seemed to find that funny, as he cracked a smirk. “Oh no, your daily login bonuses! …Ah. That wasn’t what you meant.”

“Sorry? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Never mind. Look, don’t sweat this too much. Just roll with it and come along for the ride.” In an undertone, to himself, Vince added, “I guess.”

There was no other choice but for me to follow those directions. I had come this far, and it was too late to turn back. All I could do was make like the poem and exhaust my every effort.

“…Hey, be careful out there,” Vince called at me. “Miss Octavia isn’t as delicate as you think.”

By the time I turned my head, it was too late to do anything but catch a glimpse of Vince’s back as he walked away. He acted like he hadn’t said a word.

Our weary reserve force, Jeffrey, took up position at the bar in wait for the final member of our party, should he eventually show up. If Vince was right and there was no reception, we were cut off from the outside world. Jeffrey was, therefore, the best person to stay behind and welcome an exhausted-from-travel Henry.

More importantly, Jeffrey was still fighting some exhaustion himself. He kept zoning out at random intervals, so I wanted to give him an opportunity to take a breather.

Jeffrey wished me good luck and waved as I began to climb the stairs. The boards under my feet groaned with every step I took, but as they showed no signs of breaking, I decided to ignore them. A member of the hotel staff followed me at a distance, probably to ensure I didn’t flip my lid and trash the hotel.

My key card's label read Room 202. I paused once I found the right door. What if someone was in there? I didn't think I would find anyone, but at the same time, there was no reason to be cocky. *Oh, to hell with it,* I thought. If there was ever a time to say it, this was it: *It's go time*.

I held the key card out to the door, and the lock sprang open with a buzz.

Inside, I found...no one. The room was large and carpeted. It had an enormous closet, a bathroom, and a bedroom. In the center of these three rooms stood a round, candy-colored table—an absurdity, given the way it obstructed passage. On top of the table sat a set of plates and cutlery that could have been at home in a high-end restaurant. The plate directly in the middle was covered by a silver serving dish cover, begging me to lift it.

I hoisted the cover with a flourish and saw, on the plate underneath, a stone. A gemstone. It was a deep black, the same color as my hair. Opaque. This small elliptical cabochon lay at the bottom of a simple, white clay bowl. The bowl was made by a Japanese brand famous for its large Sri Lankan production facilities.

Below the bowl, on a cream-colored card, were the words "Which one?" The question was simple. It was also written in the same elegant hand of the *road of* cards. When I looked closer, I realized there was a set of illustrated cards underneath the knife and fork. I flipped each of them over to find key cards stuck to their backs.

The right-hand card depicted people from a Native American tribe with face paint and feather headdresses. Its key card was labeled "203." The left card showed a group of people living at one of the poles in snow-covered fur clothes. Its key card read "201."

Now I understood. I picked up the right card. The game, I realized, involved me answering riddles about gemstones or things related to gemstones. The one in this room was a kind of obsidian, a semiprecious stone that was often used in pendants with black pearls. Its other name was Apache tears.

The Apache were one of the indigenous tribes of the United States of America. In the second half of the nineteenth century, after battles between Apache horsemen and American settlers,

legend said that a number of the Apache warriors chose to die an honorable death rather than face defeat. Their wives, upon learning of the loss of their husbands, cried tears that turned into these black stones. That part may have been fiction, but the battles weren't. They were part of history—they had really happened. Perhaps these pieces of obsidian *were* the tears of everyone who had lost a loved one in those wars.

The right card was my answer, so I took the room key and went to find a map. Then I was off to Room 203.

When I got there, I was greeted by a similar setup: a round table, cards on the left and right, and a gemstone hidden under a silver dish cover. The instructions read, "Order them correctly and choose the second in descending order." Four different, flawless gemstones sat atop the white plate. A diamond, a piece of coral, an emerald, and a peridot.

I groaned before snatching a banana from a basket on the bedside table with a placard saying, "Please enjoy." My expression was deadly serious as I faced the puzzle and chomped on the banana. I needed brain food—sugar—to solve this riddle. I was well on my way to becoming a miniature version of Richard, the Emperor of Sweets himself.

This question of "order" was one of mineralogy, most likely how deep (or not at all) in the Earth's crust the gem "stones" formed. Ordering alphabetically, by either the Latin alphabet or the Japanese syllabary, would have been too easy. Not for someone who had taken the Road of Gemstones. So, from crust to mantle, the order ran coral, emerald, peridot, and diamond. Second on that list was emerald. This puzzle taxed my nerves and brain both, but now I was on to the next room.

The third room's task asked me to determine if a mineral was cavansite or pentagonite. I chose pentagonite. As the name suggested, the pentagonal crystal structure was visible with a magnifying glass, so this challenge was easy.

In the fourth room, I found samples of gold and silver on either side of a green gemstone along with the instructions "Choose its friend." I picked up the stone. Its color changed depending on which angle I looked at it from—a distinctive feature of the mineral

vivianite. In the past, vivianite was mined in the Americas and sent back to Europe to be used as a pigment in paint. Its most famous mine was in Potosi, which was also home to a well-known silver mine. Therefore, silver was its friend.

On to the next. And the next. And the next.

The scavenger hunt had me running around the whole hotel, from every floor to the gardens and pool. I regretted skipping so many workouts in recent weeks. I had hoped to exchange a silent smile and a wave with Richard if I passed him along the way, but we never encountered each other. The two routes must have been planned too well, or maybe Vince was playing traffic cop and diverting us around each other.

My tour of this grand facility eventually took me to Room 305. The moment I opened the door with my key card, I felt that something was slightly off. The room was larger than the other guest rooms I had seen so far and had more furniture. Maybe that was it. That, and the paintings on the wall.

There were three. Each was little more than a single color—red, yellow, and blue, respectively—but oddly enough, I found those colors comforting. With that said, they had nothing to do with gemstones.

I turned my attention to the round table in the center of the room, which looked just like the ones in all the other rooms. I pulled the silver cover off the tray, picked up the card, and read the single sentence written there. The stone was just as lonely as the card, and this one, unlike the others, was trapped in a plastic case. I couldn't touch it directly or turn it over to see what was underneath.

"What," read the card, "is my name?"

The question sounded like something out of a children's book. I could almost have sworn I had read something like that before. A card that said "Eat me" or "Drink me" …Oh. That was from *Alice in Wonderland*. Riddles and rich girls in a colonial hotel hidden away in the mountains in a southern island nation—put like that, my current situation sounded as fantastical as falling down a rabbit hole.

The stone inside the case was flat and a beautiful turquoise color. Indeed, that shade could belong to a turquoise or to a lapis lazuli. Of the two, it looked right down the middle. Perhaps a

smidgen closer to lapis lazuli. Sure enough, the leftmost card said “lapis lazuli” while the other said “turquoise.”

I looked at the room number on the back of the “turquoise” card and pulled off its key card. But then, the key card still in my hand, I took one last look at the stone. With a silent apology to the gem, I picked it up and lightly shook it. It didn’t move. It was stuck fast in its case. I frowned. Was this what I thought it was?

Think, Seigi. Octavia couldn’t have arrived long before we had. She must have only prepared two answers for each question because there hadn’t been time to do anything else. However, when I thought about it further, I realized she must have started preparing long ago, if she’d rented out the hotel for an extended length of time. Since the hotel staff had accepted the arrangement readily, the whole event must have been set up far in advance.

Wasn’t this puzzle too simple, then?

I wasn’t satisfied with any of the choices, either. Was this gemstone really just lapis lazuli or turquoise? Something about that didn’t seem right.

I felt like I had turned into a male version of Alice as I began to turn the room upside down. I hunted under the bed, lifted chairs to see if anything was under their legs, and pulled out all the drawers in the antique bureau. The object of my search turned up under a pair of slippers in the closet: a single card reading “neither.”

The “neither” card did not have a key card attached to the back, just more words. “Tell your answer to the staff member.” My mood soured as if I had swallowed ten pickled plums in one go. Had *all* the rooms had something like this in it? *I don’t even think I can even recall which rooms I’ve been in so far...*

I stopped myself from following that train of thought further. I had confidence in my other answers, and besides, they hadn’t seemed like trick questions. I must have gotten them all right. This question was simply a plot twist. Definitely. Had to be. I could almost hear Richard telling me to calm down and stop panicking. Now more than ever, I needed to have a clear head.

I opened the door to the hallway and walked out. The staff member, a Sri Lankan man who had been watching me from afar since the very beginning, was still standing there, as silent as a

statue. *Turns out,* I thought, *he's here to do more than keep an eye on me.*

I flashed him Octavia's card and asked if I could give him the answer to my riddle. He smiled blithely as he had been waiting just for that.

"But of course. However, your answer must be correct. I cannot give you the next card for any wrong answers."

That stumped me. I thought as hard as I could. It wasn't a gemstone, not in the strictest sense of the word, but I thought I had the right answer. I knew—well, figured—Richard would have given the same answer, too, so I had to do the same.

"It's Egyptian blue," I said, sounding out the English name carefully.

Egyptian blue was not a gemstone or even a rock at all. It was the name of a glaze—that is, a type of pigment used to coat pottery. Also described as Alexandria or Cleopatra blue, this elegant blue color had been used since 3000 BCE to create beautiful blue pottery in place of its much more expensive cousin, lapis lazuli. It also didn't need to be ground into a paste first. The "mineral" in the case wasn't a stone but a shard of faience—glazed pottery—colored with Egyptian blue. The words turquoise and lapis lazuli applied to more than just gemstones. If considered in terms of color, the answer from this riddle shifted from the what—the pottery shard—to the shade.

The hotel worker's face gave me no clue as to whether my answer was right or wrong. He simply nodded and smiled politely. *Please don't get my hopes up. This isn't a quiz show.*

"That is correct. Now, if you'll please follow me."

The relief exploded out of me in the form of a huge sigh. The man handed me an envelope, which I tore open to pull out a familiar card with another room number on it. I shuddered internally. I would have been done for if I had picked turquoise or lapis lazuli. I would have wound up in the wrong room, wasted hours, and caused problems for Richard. I needed to stay on my toes.

The next puzzle required me to identify what the item on the dish was made of. Unfortunately, the item in question was a puppet—a traditional Indonesian shadow puppet. Mr. Nakata had told me these puppets were called *wayang*. Even now, I could hear Hiromi in my head demanding to know what he was thinking, buying one of those and bringing it home to us from his workplace. Even as she scolded him, she'd sounded fond. I must have been in junior high at the time.

Mr. Nakata, I said to myself, *I love you. You told me you were proud of me, just like my grandmother did*.

See this, Seigi? I heard him say. *They call this* wayang. *It's made of—*

It was made of—

No, there was no point in taking a trip down memory lane. Mr. Nakata had never taught me that fun fact, so I must have been getting it mixed up with another memory. If not Mr. Nakata, then who would have told me that? Not him, but definitely an older man. Saul? Yes, it was Saul. Saul Ranasinghe Ali, my professor in all things Southeast Asian. His lectures came with spiced tea. Now I remembered one such conversation, punctuated with the sharp taste of the tea on my tongue. The memory was almost too distant to recall, but it was there.

This room didn't have two cards. Was it a free-for-all answer, then? Once again, I turned around and spoke to the hotel worker standing there patiently with his ever-present grin.

"Buffalo horn," I said. "The horns of a water buffalo."

The majority of *wayang* puppets were black and made of wood or, these days, plastic. However, the *wayang* Mr. Nakata brought back as a souvenir had a white portion in it. I remembered muttering under my breath, "What the heck is that white stuff?"—I certainly didn't say it audibly—but my resident mustachioed gentleman of a jeweler told me in his cultured tones all about what was used to make these shadow puppets found in Hindu performances.

Some *wayang*, he explained, were made of bone and decorated with all sorts of things: leather, coral, gold. If not bone, then ivory or buffalo horn. The problem came down to discerning

the difference between animal bone, ivory, and water buffalo horn. The Washington Convention limited international trade of certain items, and as such, some jewelers in Ratnapura would mention as an afterthought, “Just so you know, that’s ivory.” “Just so you know, that’s made of shark teeth.” Ranasinghe Jewelry didn’t work with either material, so I had never bought any. Still, I had a passing familiarity.

Not more than a month ago, someone gave me a shoehorn made of water buffalo horn as a freebie with another purchase I made. I firmly refused to accept it, but he waved away my objections with a laugh. Why not, after all? Water buffalos weren’t endangered, and their horns were a common enough material. Buffalo horn was easy to cut into thin strips and use to manufacture all sorts of items.

That was how the small shoehorn ended up coming home to live with me in the house in Sri Lanka. It started black on one end and faded to white at the other. A guy knows his own shoehorn, after all, so I felt confident identifying this material now. Talk about a lucky break.

The hotel worker smiled once more and ushered me toward yet another room. He didn’t make a move to consult any cheat sheet. It was possible that he had memorized the answers to all the riddles, but if I had been him, I probably would have tapped out at two or three. That probably meant I had only a little further to go—or so I hoped, at any rate. I feared my luck would soon run out. If the difficulty kept ramping up, I knew I would be in trouble.

I followed a flight of stairs down into a room with a billiard table. Even now, I expected a handsome English spy smoking a cigar to pop up at any moment. But instead of a spy, I was greeted with a riddle. The usual silver serving dish looked out of place on the green billiard table. I removed the cover to find a necklace and a card.

“The name of the youngest of the three brothers,” it said.

The necklace contained a single type of ashy black stone. Three brothers, but only one stone. Three brothers. The first thing that came to mind was Henry, Jeffrey, and Richard, but I dismissed

that. I doubted that was what Octavia wanted, and Richard wasn't actually Henry and Jeffrey's brother.

A necklace of black gemstones, then. Each was roughly the size of a large pearl and strung together like a particularly expensive rosary. Wave patterns were carved into the stones, proof of their softness. They weren't glossy, which ruled out anything like onyx or obsidian. The gold clasps showed a hint of rust. Was this an antique?

My biggest clue was Octavia's background, which I had courtesy of Richard. With all those hints, even I had a fighting chance of figuring this out. I walked back to the hotel worker and pointed to one of the black beads.

"This stone is called jet. That's three letters—J-E-T—so the third brother's name is *t*."

Jet. A type of lignite—a low-quality form of coal used in industrial manufacturing—that won a dramatic burst of popularity in the Victorian era for its uses in jewelry. Queen Victoria herself loved jet, which led to it becoming a fad.

Black stones. Mourning jewelry, as they were called. Not to be confused with *morning* jewelry. Mourning as in grieving and loss. Jewelry to remember the dead by. After Victoria's husband, Albert, passed away, the queen forwent all extravagant clothing as a sign of mourning. She preferred to wear black jet over diamonds as a way to express her loss.

The hotel worker smiled once more at my answer and, much to my confusion, groped around under the table before returning with a ball in his grasp. Like I was in an English 101 course, I asked him, "Is that a ball?"

He smiled like he was very pleased with himself. "Tama."

"What?"

"This is a tama."

He pointed to one of the jet beads on the necklace and repeated "tama." My brain was caught between Japanese and English, and it took a moment before recognition finally dawned. *Ohhh.* I knew what he meant.

In Japanese, *tama* meant ball. Gemstones were sometimes called *hoju*—literally a treasured ball. The word connoted something round and valuable. On the extreme end, the globe—the *chikyu* or "earth ball"—was another type of ball. What was the hotel worker trying to say, then?

Before I could ask, he switched places with me, set aside the dish with the jade beads, and picked up a long pool cue resting next to the table. With one loud, satisfying clack, he made a beautiful shot across the billiard board. Balls rolled across the green baize and fell into the pockets with a clunk.

When all the noise died away, only a single white ball—the cue ball—remained on the table. The man picked it up and passed it to me. There was no number on it. But no. Maybe, I thought, I should take this as *zero*, the shape of the ball.

"This is the final clue," said the hotel worker. "Please give it to the butler."

"What butler? Do you mean Vince?"

The hotel worker just smiled. What was that supposed to mean? Go back to where we started? I left the game room and retraced my steps back to the hotel lobby. This building was large and winding enough that I got a little lost, but the signs along the way stopped me from going too far off course. By the time I arrived back, Jeffrey was no longer on the couch. He must have gone somewhere else to wait for Henry.

"Vince?"

"Took you long enough."

He still wore slacks, but he had transformed from the waist up and was now clad in a loud zebra-print hoodie. He leaned forward over his knees, a casual pose, as he waited for me on the lobby sofa.

"Here," I said, and tried to offer him the zero ball.

Vince smirked. "Well, I'll be. You got everything right. You would have ended up here either way, but the number on the ball would tell me how many you got wrong."

"Wait. What if I showed up with a one or a two on the ball?"

"It wouldn't have changed anything on my end, although it might have soured Miss Octavia's impression of you. Not that a zero

will help your case much at this stage, and we would have considered a couple of wrong answers acceptable, anyway. Now, come on. Let's go."

I didn't need to ask where we were going. Nor why Octavia had come all the way here from Switzerland.

My guide in the zebra-print hoodie led me back up to the very top of the hotel's grand staircase and showed me to a room at the end of the hall. I felt like a king who never had to set foot off his red carpet. The door was flanked by two beefy white men in black suits, standing like soldiers. They were probably bodyguards. Security police, as they were called.

Vince knocked on the heavy door. There was no answer, but Vince said, "Miss Octavia, I've brought him." A moment later, I heard a small clink from the other side of the door. The click of a lock. Vince took a long, hard look at me and mouthed, "Good luck."

The door creaked open, and for a moment, I was at a loss of what to do. The room layout looked identical to every other guest room, but there the resemblance ended. There was no bed and no basket of fruit on the side table. It looked more like an enormous parlor than a bedroom.

Where the round table would have been in all the other rooms was a girl. She was tiny and reminded me of a French doll. She wore a blue ribbon in her hair and a blue dress, just like I had seen on the tablet screen earlier. Her skin was so pale, it was almost translucent; her facial features as classical as if she were a ghost risen from the hotel's past. That was no prerecorded video we'd watched earlier. She'd actually video-called us.

Octavia stood there and looked me up and down.

"Hi there," I tried. She didn't respond, putting me more in mind of a doll with every second. I smiled, just enough to not be rude, and kept introducing myself. "My name is Seigi Nakata. It's very nice to meet you."

"Ah, so you speak English. We won't need Vince as an intermediary, then." Octavia's voice was as soft as a whisper. "I take it you're capable of understanding complex subject matter in English."

“I can definitely try. I think I’ll be able to keep up, so long as I can ask questions if I get stuck.”

“Yes, I suppose that will suffice.” She nodded like a gracious queen granting her subjects a favor. *Thank you.*

Oddly enough, I felt like she was testing me. The first stage of the test was those riddles; the second was this face-to-face interview. It was almost like the civil service exam. Of course, this test would not make me a civil servant of the Japanese government. Rather, it was like a final exam of me as a person and everything I had learned during my studies: my knowledge of gemstones, my command of English, and my communication skills all in one. Saul once said that as long as we lived, every single day was an all-out battle. Only now did it truly make sense.

Meet Miss Octavia Manorland, seventeen years old.

English seventeen-year-olds and Japanese seventeen-year-olds could not have been less alike. Many Westerners said Asians look younger than they really are, which suggested that Europeans physically matured faster than their Asian counterparts. Speaking as a Japanese person, I would have guessed Octavia was in her final year of college. However, there was something fairy tale-like about her that went beyond her appearance. I estimated she was only about five feet tall, which gave her a childlike quality. But her piercing gaze made her look more experienced, perhaps even hardened.

It wasn’t intensity or maturity in her eyes. Just distance.

I told myself I’d known all along she wasn’t the type to warm up to people right off the bat. As I tried to comfort myself, Octavia’s pale pink lips parted.

“Mr. Seigi Nakata?”

“Yes?”

“Tell me, what is your happy ending?”

What? Maybe I had misheard her because she spoke too fast, but I could have sworn she had said something bizarre. My happy ending?

I cocked my head in confusion and asked her to repeat herself. But she clammed up. Was that the wrong thing to say? I hadn’t

expected her to take the initiative to begin with, so in the end, I recited the speech I had planned in advance.

"Octavia, may I say something to you? Richard and I both know you're working with the Claremont family butlers to recover the fake gems that Leah Claremont once distributed. If you are being forced into this arrangement, then we…"

"We?" she interrupted.

It was the weirdest thing. I knew perfectly well I was speaking to a flesh-and-blood human being, but the girl in front of me looked more like a fairy made of crystal. She seemed insubstantial. Cold, as rude as it was to say. Like our feelings were too different for us to understand each other.

But maybe that was only my imagination. I hoped it was, at least.

"…We were thinking that we could help."

"Help, you say. Help me?"

"Yes."

I nodded, and Octavia smirked before bursting into laughter. She didn't laugh like a little girl. She felt more like a thing which had only taken on the appearance of a human and studied how to laugh. It was hearty—too hearty, even for a forced laugh. Just how badly had I messed up?

"Mr. Seigi Nakata, let me repeat myself. This question will also, as you so put it, 'help' me."

"…All right."

"What, pray tell, is your happy ending?"

So I hadn't misheard her. A happy ending. What was a happy ending? Was she asking me to read the few final lines before "And they all lived happily ever after. The end."?

What was *my* happy ending?

Stumped, I repeated her question out loud.

"I want to know more about you, Mr. Nakata. I can tell from the photos, videos, and Vince's stories that you care deeply about Mr. Richard. But in what sense? What sort of ending are you hoping it will lead you to? What is it that you are trying to obtain?"

I was confused. *Hold the phone,* I thought. I walked in here under the assumption that Octavia would chew me out over Deborah and Richard. Like she would tell me I was gravely mistaken to think Richard still loved her. Or that I was standing in the way of Richard's marriage. Not this. I could come up with an endless number of arguments in Richard's defense against all those accusations, but not this.

What was it that I was trying to obtain? Did she mean in terms of my relationship with Richard? And if so, why? Well, the why of it didn't matter. This was her question, and if I wanted to keep talking to her, I had no choice but to play along to some degree. Besides, the question wasn't an especially difficult one.

"Well, I... I think I'd like to be lifelong friends with Richard."

"Should Mr. Richard marry or develop a close friendship with anyone else, would you consider that happy ending unobtainable?"

"No, not at all. People can have more than one friend. I don't want to have him all to myself or anything like that. I just want..."

I just wanted to be with him for as long as I could.

Talk with him until it was no longer possible.

Have him eat my food forever. And not just pudding, either.

I wanted a continuation of what we had.

When it came down to it, I supposed, that was exactly what I was trying to obtain.

Octavia's amber eyes sharpened as she scowled at me. At least she didn't burst out laughing again.

"Then I was right. You're not the right one after all."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I want to see a happy ending for both Ms. Deborah and Mr. Richard. Once I've seen it through, I shall call an end to the entire thing."

A happy ending, followed by The End. Which made me "not the right one." What did any of that mean?

Talking to Octavia reminded me of clearing land mines. Granted, I'd never seen a land mine, much less cleared any. But conversing with her was like walking a battlefield that could blow

me sky-high at any moment. I had to edge around the bombs, not knowing when they might go off, and creep up on her very, very carefully before gingerly making contact.

It was nerve-racking. I wanted to defuse the bombs, not criticize Octavia for her choices. Not at all. That wasn't how adults fought their battles. If only I had a way to ask her why she wanted to bring down two people she once loved without hitting the trigger that made her think, *That's it. I simply must explode.*

Praying I wasn't cutting the wrong wire, I asked, "Uh, if I may… how are you defining a happy ending?"

Octavia looked a bit contemplative but not explosive. At least not for now. She remarked, in a perfectly detached fashion, "The point where one thinks, 'With this, I can die happy.' I would like both Mr. Richard and Ms. Deborah to reach such a point. I spoke of revenge at the suggestion of a few certain someones whom you can no doubt guess. I suppose, in some sense, I do want a happy sort of revenge. It is what they deserve."

To me, that sounded like payback for them leaving her. She wasn't wrong for thinking that way, but it also wasn't right for her to force something like this upon them. People weren't gemstones. They weren't pawns to be manipulated however you pleased.

Maybe if she understood that, I had thought prior to meeting her, *she would open up to me.* But something didn't add up. Something about the real Octavia's goal didn't match the image I had of her. I barely knew her, but even then, I could tell she actually wanted her two beloved tutors and caretakers to find happiness. Why, then, was she fixated on a specific ending point? Why that disquieting comment about dying happy?

"Octavia?" I said at some length.

"Yes?"

"After you have, uh, seen them to their happy endings…what are you going to do next?"

For a time, the crystalline fairy stared back at me like she didn't know what I was asking. The only warmth about her was in the golden glow of the amber on her collar. Her blonde hair swished when she tilted her head in confusion. It made me flinch. She wasn't

in the same category as Richard, but she still had a face so beautiful, it was intimidating. Her golden-brown eyes gleamed with icy cold.

"Little and less. I shall simply make an end to it."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Much as you did at the Claremont estate, as I have been made to understand."

Wait, what did I do at the Claremont estate? Ending it. Ending it. At that phrase, everything came back to me. The curse of the diamond. The shackles that held Richard. The feeling I had, the wish that someone could break his chains. Was Octavia referring to when I threw the diamond? Why bring that up here? Scratch that—how did she know so much about that incident?

I shelved the topic of ending things and asked her who told her about the diamond debacle. Probably one of the Claremonts themselves, I figured. But Octavia's response was unlike anything I could have come up with.

The crystalline fairy tittered. Her voice was devoid of all warmth.

"Why, you really have no idea, do you? You've become a minor celebrity of sorts for those who run in certain social spheres."

"Wh-what social spheres are you talking about?"

"High society, as it's called. I have little to do with it myself, being a recluse, but there are plenty who have much and more involvement in this lofty social stratum. Such individuals tend to send out gossipy electronic correspondence that makes its way into even my inbox. Imagine, if you would, the sort of individuals who enjoy the films at the Festival de Cannes, cheer on the racers in the Monaco Grand Prix, and experience the Tour de France from VIP seats at the Arc de Triomphe. Such are the players in modern high society. To them, there is no finer delicacy to feast on than gossip, and you are, after all, a superhero who rushed all the way from Asia to save your beloved."

It felt like a bell was tolling in my mind. That was ridiculous. Were people really saying that about me? Maybe Octavia was

exaggerating things, but if even a fraction of what she said was true, that was bad news for me. Worse, it was plain embarrassing.

Because, to be perfectly pragmatic, there was no point to anything I did. Had I not thrown the stone, it would have been obvious under natural light that the gem wasn't a diamond, thus invalidating the will. And that would have been that, albeit with a lot of whining and "Oh, come on! It was like that all along." Besides, Richard told me off afterward. The incident was about as big of an embarrassment as anything could be. Octavia may have learned about my actions through the grapevine, but she'd heard nothing of how I felt about it.

"So…I 'ended it'? In the way you mean it?"

"Correct. I would have thought it obvious for you, of all people."

"Well, no. Not really. I don't get what you mean by that."

"You should. For your loved one's happiness, you threw a stone estimated to be worth three hundred thousand pounds. You didn't care if they killed you for it. Isn't that so? Mr. Nakata, I would call that the quintessential happy ending."

My breath died in my throat, or at least it felt like that.

I'm so sorry, but please just assume I'm dead.

That was what I had almost sent to my mother, Hiromi. I ended up canceling the message before it sent, but when I had first typed it out, I had meant every word of it. If I had gone to prison, I wouldn't have been able to get my hands on a cell phone for decades. Hence the need to forewarn her. That is, if I wasn't beaten to death before I could even leave the room.

I only messaged her because my decision to save Richard came as naturally as breathing. A will would have been more formal, but in any other respect, that was my last message to Hiromi.

Octavia watched me in satisfied silence as I struggled to find words to say next. She smiled with grace, but still with no human warmth.

My words had deserted me, but I struggled to string a sentence together nonetheless. "Octavia…what is your real goal?"

“To see a happy ending. And then the end.”

The end being something entirely different than the end of the “revenge,” aka this particularly expensive way of harassing Richard.

The end being the end of her own life.

I must have made a terrible grimace, because Octavia tittered again like she had read my mind.

“Don’t ask why, Mr. Nakata. ‘Why?’ is a nonsense question. I simply want to die. I believe Mr. Richard has told you of the accident in the mountains, no? Ever since, my sole desire has been to die. I am told this is a bad thing. I’ve seen many, many dozens of counselors and therapists who have all asked the same question: ‘Why on Earth would you say that?’ Which is another way of telling me to stop. And yet, for all that, I still wish to die. I don’t want to watch any more of my loved ones leave me. Everyone who comes near me meets some sort of dreadful fate. Many people have told me that this isn’t true, that it’s all in my own head. But what if it isn’t? What if I were to lose someone again? Who would take responsibility for that? No one. No therapist, no counselor. Rather than…than feel all those emotions again, I’d prefer to be proactive and take matters into my own hands. I’d like to remove myself from the world of the living. The end.”

Never had I met anyone who could say something so depressing with such rationality. I couldn’t say anything back. It was all I could do to hold in my tears.

Octavia laughed once more. She looked like she wanted to call me pitiful.

“When I’ve expressed this opinion before, the nuns who’ve volunteered to take care of me all hug me and tell me I’m such a poor thing. But they have no desire to truly care *for* me. They always leave when I insist they’ll die if they stay with me for long. Granted, I suppose they might have taken it as me threatening to kill them. Especially with the level of conviction in my voice. And really, who would die for a complete stranger? Only someone with their own problems, surely. I resolve my personal problems myself, so it’s only rational that others should do the same. Oh, it’s all right. You can cry or not; it’s all the same to me.”

Phew. I turned away so she wouldn't see and rubbed my fingers in my eyes. *Give me three seconds, please.*

A moan came burbling from the pit of my stomach. I wasn't crying because I pitied Octavia. *I* was the pitiful one here. Pitiful and embarrassing. I felt so ashamed of myself it brought me to tears. I was ashamed of what I had done in the diamond incident. At the time, I hadn't stopped to consider what I was doing or the repercussions of my actions. I just wanted to throw that gem. I disliked myself so much that the only thing I wanted was to do something good for *someone*, be needed by *someone*, and then remove myself from the equation like that meant nothing. Throwing the diamond seemed like my perfect chance, and I took it. It was just the stage for a larger disappearing act.

Thank goodness Richard chewed me out. He saved me.

But a sliver of the curse I'd cast back then had stuck fast in the heart of one of the people involved. Not mine. A smaller heart. Like a cursed medal pinned to the breast of the girl in front of me.

God, I thought. *I screwed up big time.*

But I had to bottle up those feelings within three seconds. My tears meant nothing to Octavia.

She looked startled when I turned back around, as if she hadn't expected me to actually bounce back in three seconds. I didn't blame her for that. Grown men bawling their eyes out weren't the most common thing in the world, and grown men who could stop their crying on a dime were even rarer. Besides, I still looked like a complete mess. My nose was dribbling, and when I apologized and hurried to wipe it, Octavia handed me a tissue box from a nearby table. It had a blue cloth cover with a picture of fruit on it. The same kind as the ones found in any kiosk in Hong Kong.

I turned away again and blew my nose with a loud honk. This time, when I turned back to Octavia and insisted I was fine, she giggled. *Good.* So she could look like a seventeen-year-old girl sometimes, too. For some reason, she reminded me of Vince. I wondered what side of her she showed to him. The crystal fairy? Or the young teenage girl who pouted and huffed, like in the video we saw?

"Can I ask something, Octavia?"

“You may.”

“Vince is around here somewhere, isn’t he?”

“That he is. He is my personal servant. For pay, that is.”

“…Did you know that he’s a whiz at video games?”

“I’m sorry?”

“So this happened in Provence…”

I told Octavia about the old man I met in the French countryside who was a fan of a Japanese shooter game. His name was Pierre. A baker. His two passions were playing that game and baking good bread. But for all that, he didn’t know every trick in the game until Vince taught him and made him very happy. Pierre told Vince he had been playing it for five years and had never known the game could do that, and Vince hadn’t laughed at him.

Octavia looked amused, almost proud. Then her icy glare snapped back on. My heart sank.

“And? What is the point of this anecdote, Mr. Nakata?”

“I think Vince is an amazing person. What about you, Octavia?”

“I try not to think about him at all. Our relationship is purely a financial one.”

“Ah.”

I left it there. She and I both knew there were some things better left unsaid. At least for now.

Time to go back and answer the question that started this all.

“To me, my happy ending would be… Well, if I had to say, no ending at all. I’d like to spend the rest of my life with Richard, wherever the two of us end up. But…I think…Deborah might feel the same way.”

“Being alive is the ‘happy’ part, so you see no point in seeking an ‘end’? Am I understanding you correctly? You and I have quite a different outlook on life and death.”

“No, I don’t think just being alive is the same thing as happiness.”

If it was, then the leading cause of death for people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five in the island nation where I grew

up wouldn't have been suicide. Despair was a part of being human. Wanting to die was common, and some people ultimately acted on that desire. But now I knew it wasn't so simple to divide everyone into two camps: those who died and those who didn't. Not after I had lived through so many fortunate coincidences it defied the imagination.

Against all odds, I was alive.

I was alive *because* I was alive.

"When I was so depressed I wanted to die, I…I found things that made me think 'Why don't I try holding out just a little longer?' These things are like…like gemstones to me. Things that make me glad I'm alive after all. Things that make me glad that I'm me. I don't believe…well, happiness and all…I don't believe happiness is so easy. I think it's very challenging, in fact. But when you want to die, if you can find something—no matter how small—that makes you feel like there's good in the world, then maybe happiness isn't so impossible."

"Yes, I understand your argument. That is precisely why I am searching for my happy ending. While my greatest wish may be to say goodbye to the world, my second greatest is to make amends for all those who have lost their happiness because of me. Mr. Richard and Ms. Deborah are still alive. If it is within my power to make it so, then I would truly love to see them both happy—to achieve their happy ending, as it were. I want everyone I know to receive their true happy endings, at which point I can die without feeling bad for what I've done to them."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Do you pity me? Here, then you have the right to laugh at me. Yes, yes, you're quite welcome. It's nothing to be proud of, but I know how very absurd my life has been. I don't need your pity. To be frank, it's quite uncomfortable to be treated like that."

"…Octavia, do you hate me?"

"No. Nor do I like you. My feelings are what they are, and that's that."

I paused. "Do you hate yourself?"

“What is the point of answering that question? I don’t, but nor do I like myself. Again, my feelings are what they are, and that’s that. I don’t have long for this world as it is, so why should it matter? Oh, I must specify that I am in perfect health. I have even registered as an organ donor. I would like my body parts to be recycled and do some good for someone else.”

My thoughts were in turmoil. It sounded like her only option for a beautiful happy ending was death. It was “happy” because she got to give her organs away. “Happy” because it allowed her to donate her family’s fortune. And, coincidentally, because it allowed her to no longer exist. “Happy.”

How revolting.

It made my stomach churn. I didn’t want a happy ending that tragic.

My face clouded over. Octavia must have seen those same storm clouds on many faces, as she smiled slightly and bobbed her head in one graceful gesture.

“I see we’re back to pity. Oh, no matter. If it bothers you so much, you’re always free to leave. Or you’re quite welcome to take your life before I take mine.”

Just give up already said a voiceless *someone* behind me. The lack of voice was oddly childlike. *You’ll never change her mind. It’s impossible.*

If I jumped out the window, I knew I wouldn’t die. This was the third floor. According to the conversation with Jeffrey and Vince, we were far from any hospitals, but that didn’t change anything—jumping would, at best, shatter a leg bone or whatever. A manageable pain. Sort of.

What if I jumped off just to make a point? To show that anyone could do it, even me. That I was prepared to die, at least enough to jump out a third-floor window. That anyone could throw their life away, which is exactly why it was so horrible to subject anyone else to such an act of selfishness.

My younger self sneered at me. I could only see the outline of him, not whatever face he was making. He was pitch black, like a

shadow. Only a tiny sliver of a smirk could be seen within the silhouette.

Do it, he said. *Kill yourself.*

No.

No, no, no.

I'd escaped that dark place in my life. My friends and family would have been miserable if I killed myself. Hadn't I just talked myself down from that ledge? I felt like I couldn't keep track of who was talking to whom anymore. *Okay. This is my mouth. Open my mouth and start talking.* I wouldn't get anywhere by only talking to myself.

I forced the words out: "I…want you to live."

And that was it, honestly. That was all I wanted. Think just how devastated "Mr." Richard would have been if she died.

Octavia composed herself. Once again, she looked and sounded like a sculpture molded from snow.

"Your name is Seigi, isn't it? Justice, that is. The sense of what is right coupled with the notion of judgment. The version of happiness you seek is neither the happy ending I desire nor one I am capable of granting. Please take that back."

She said it with such definiteness that I didn't know what to do. No. I knew the conversation couldn't end here. There had to be something—I had to say something. But what? What was the number one thing I wanted to convey to her? To *her*, from *me*?

What I ended up saying was a simple question. "Hey, Octavia! You've studied gemstones, haven't you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"All the riddles you gave me were super hard. I've only been studying to be a jeweler for a year, so I found them really tricky. I was thinking…are you…? Do you like stones, too?"

"Not especially, no."

Then that meant she learned all about them for me. Even if they didn't interest her personally. Right?

I asked her that, and she frowned like it was an odd question. "I suppose," she said. "I meant it by way of apology for how I kept

testing you in France and the Caribbean. But I must say, I found it oddly…fun, I suppose, to watch you via Vince as you so studiously learned more about gemstones and got yourself into scrapes. I wanted to increase the difficulty of the challenge, that's all."

"Oh? Okay. In that case, no apology necessary."

She paused before repeating, "I beg your pardon?"

Well, there really wasn't anything to apologize for. I meant it.

"I enjoyed it a ton! Sure, my feelings were a mess on the cruise, but that wasn't because of you. Some jerk caused that."

"I…don't know what to say."

"And the treasure hunt in Provence felt like a reward because it allowed me to get to know Richard's mom. They look almost identical, but their personalities couldn't be more different. It made me think, *It's kinda funny how parents and kids can turn out that way, huh?* It was odd, but fun. Kind of like meeting an old friend again after a long time apart."

"But surely—"

"Then, when I heard you were coming to Sri Lanka—well, of course I was nervous about what might happen, but I was also super excited. Heck, even now I'm still happy you set up this whole interesting scavenger hunt for me. It felt kind of like you were acknowledging all my efforts."

"Stop! I've heard enough!"

The desperation in her scream made the blood drain from my face. There was such heartbreak in it, like a person who was yelling "Stop!" in a frantic attempt to ward off some terrible fate. It made me realize I had no idea what I was doing.

Quick as a flash, Octavia rubbed her eyes before turning her amber glare on me.

"You don't understand in the slightest. I have no desire for anyone to like me, not one bit. Not even you, Mr. Nakata. I am most displeased. Please close your mouth and keep it shut."

She didn't want people to care about her. That was Octavia's guiding principle. Because anyone who cared about her died or left

her. But it hurt too much to live in a world where no one, not even a single person, cared about her.

No wonder she wanted to die.

With that line of reasoning, I understood why the world seemed too cruel to her. But Vince had built *some* sort of relationship with her, right? If he could, I knew I could do it, too. It was just a matter of time. Vince had known Octavia for longer, but if I had the time, then…

"You know, I do care about you. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to get to know you better."

"Excuse me? What are you saying?"

"…You were the one who sent me the 'Help Richard' email. Weren't you?"

It was the very first thing she said to me, I added. This whole saga began with that subject line in her email. When I first got it, I had no idea what I was looking at. After more of the puzzle pieces fell into place, I thought she had set it up as a trap for either me or Richard. But looking back on it, I knew she meant it at face value. She knew that trouble lay ahead for him, but even so, her heart begged for someone to help Mr. Richard.

Which I couldn't have been more thankful for. So, I said, "Why don't we start over? Let's be friends."

"Nonsense. It's impossible."

"But—"

Octavia's response was heated. She rang the bell next to her, causing the two burly bodyguards to slam open the door and storm in. *I knew it,* I told myself. They must have been waiting outside the room for this very occasion.

"Get out. I don't want to even look at you anymore."

"I'm sorry. But I'm not done—"

"Oh, shut up! Just shut up, shut up, shut up! Vince! Where are you?"

Wait. Let me talk. Just give me a few more minutes.

It didn't matter now, but I realized that she hadn't given me an answer to any one of my questions, especially when it came to her

connection to the Claremont family butlers. I shouted, “Let me go!” and tried to struggle, but it didn’t help. The bodyguards each grabbed one of my arms, which were half as muscular as theirs. I knew I couldn’t possibly take both of them in a fight.

My mind leaped to the worst—far worse than not getting any information out of her. This was the third floor. In her anger, who knew what she might do? My heart pounded in my ears.

Then, with a flash—

Someone cut past me to stand between Octavia and me. Someone in a zebra-print hoodie and distressed jeans. Vince, now rocking a casual fit from head to toe, tilted his head slightly.

“Miss? What’s going on here?”

Vince. Vince! Here he was: the man who always saved me, in spite of whatever he said to the contrary.

For a moment, Octavia looked like a baby bird seeing its parent. Then, remembering that I was there, she spun around to show us her back.

“I just…said your name. That’s all. You don’t need to be here; I’d rather handle this alone. Leave.”

“But, miss, what about all our games?”

“Oh, please. This is no time for games.”

“It’s always time for games. And I was looking forward to playing with you and everything.”

Vince mimed a video game controller and added that he and the “miss” regularly played together. The two of them were fellow gamers, it seemed. That is, if Octavia would excuse me using that term.

A touch of human emotion returned to Octavia’s face as she muttered under her breath, “Yes, well. That was then, and this is now.”

His voice just as quiet, Vince pleaded, “Can we at least finish that one shooter game? We’re almost at the end.”

Octavia didn’t say anything.

“You know you want to.”

“…I most certainly do not!”

Vince's voice was endlessly casual, endlessly friendly, like he was a teenage boy younger than even Octavia. She adopted the face of a responsible older sister, nodded, and said in the tiniest of voices, "Fine."

Then, she had me thrown out of the room.

"Octavia!" I called.

The door slammed shut. My calling, predictably, produced no response. Eventually, even the two beefy bodyguards left. She had ordered them to escort me out, but whatever I did after that was evidently out of the scope of their jurisdiction. I could have glued myself to the door for all they cared, but I figured forcing my way back again would only result in me getting kicked out again.

I looked up and down the hallway and saw no sign of Richard. Had the road of Japanese literature been *that* difficult? I guess the end of the road could have been somewhere else entirely. I couldn't stop myself from worrying about him, but he was a grown man. If he learned that I had left Octavia to her own devices, he would have been more worried about her than I was—*and* mad at me.

It all came down to this. I pricked my ears and waited. The bodyguards didn't care if I pressed myself against the door, so long as I didn't go further. I thanked my lucky stars they only stuck to the letter of their jobs.

Inside, I heard a small argument, but I couldn't pick up on any individual words. Across from the enormous bed in the back right corner of the room was a door leading to a connecting room. From the sound of it, the two had stepped into that room to have their conversation.

A high-pitched voice groaned. Octavia was losing her temper. However, Vince's tone was as moderated as ever in response. Nothing she said seemed to get under his skin.

While I strained my ears, I heard the voices grow louder—they were coming closer. Octavia carried on a fast-paced stream of vitriol right up to the door before Vince interjected in a childish whine, "Miss, I'm thirsty."

I was taken aback. He was *thirsty*? This was not the time for such a casual comment! What on Earth could have inspired Vince to

say that?

Just as that thought crossed my mind, Octavia shrilled, “What am I going to do with you?! There is water in the fridge in the other room, as you very well know.”

“I’d rather have a soda. They sell them in the lobby downstairs.”

“Then go buy yourself some!”

“But if I step out… What about our game, miss?”

“Oh, it’s always games with you! You’re a pathetic little man!”

“You’re a hard but fun opponent, miss. Here, I’ve set up the match. Why don’t you warm up while you wait for me to come back?”

“Ha! You should learn to play better before you start offering *me* handicaps.”

As Octavia’s yelling disappeared into the other room, the door directly in front of my nose opened. I thought it was her coming out, panicked, and fell to my knees to apologize. However, when I looked up, I realized it was Vince. He smiled, as unsurprised to see me there as if he had seen me through the door. With the poise of a pop star, he kneeled down, clapped a hand on my shoulder, and whispered into my ear, “Mr. Nakata, while I’m gone, could you take my controller and play against the lady in the inner room? I’ll be right back.”

The gleam in his eyes all but said he’d kill me if I refused, which clashed horribly with the faux innocence in his tone. He said a few words of rapid English to the two beefy bodyguards before clattering down the wooden stairs with a *creak*, *creak*, *creak*.

Play against her, huh?

Carefully, yet with all possible speed, I slid around the edge of the door. The bodyguards didn’t react.

In the inner room was a large black chair with a high back. It had casters, making me think it was a swivel chair. I saw the edges of a blue dress past the chair; across the way sat a big TV displaying lifelike CG footage and blaring music that could have belonged in a Hollywood blockbuster. The console and controller looked like the cousin of the console I used to play on when I was in elementary

school. Compared to an average hotel room's décor, this chair stuck out like a sore thumb. I wondered if she had brought it in here herself.

"Vince? If you're going down for soda, grab one for me t—" She spun around in the chair, but when she saw it was me, a frown snapped onto her face. "What are you doing here?"

"It was Vince! He told me to come play with you! I'm just following orders!"

"You don't need to be so loud. I can hear you. Oh, that Vince! He's a moron when it comes to all things video game-related."

"I—I mean, I love games, too! And I'm good at them! Kind of!"

Octavia stared me down silently. Those were lies, all lies. But maybe, I thought, she would let me off for the gutsiness alone. *Please?*

She still didn't say anything. She just scooted over and left half the space in front of the TV free. There was a free controller. I looked multiple times, but I couldn't find any cables to connect it to the console. It must have been the wireless kind. How high tech.

Then the game began. The player piloted a Hollywood-esque character in army gear around through abandoned buildings choked by dust clouds and explosions. It was incredible. I realized early on that the game would eventually pit me against Octavia's character in a shoot-out. I knew what to do. I had learned in Provence. I could handle this—

The instant that unfounded conviction crossed my mind, my avatar slipped off the edge of a cliff and fell into a corner of the map littered with cartridge cases. Then he stopped moving. It happened so fast, it was over before I could blink. What the...? Was it really so easy to get a game over in modern video games?

I tapped the buttons, thinking he might come back to life if I were patient, but nothing happened. I got booted back to the menu screen and had to press a few more buttons to be transported back to the battlefield. Once again, I took a sudden tumble. Game over. My character was so uncoordinated it felt like he had stumbled into battle with a hangover.

After a moment, Octavia mumbled, *"Kusa."*

“I’m sorry, what?”

“I—I know *some* Japanese, okay?”

Octavia explained to me that *kusa* was something people said in Japanese in these sorts of situations. *Kusa*—grass. What about this was in any way grassy? Richard, an expert on all things languages, would have known. Without him, I had to conclude that a video game character immediately falling off a cliff could be described as “grass.” The more you knew.

“I’m back. I couldn’t find any soda, miss.”

“I thought you said there was some.”

“Looks like I misremembered. But they had orange juice.”

“If you wanted orange juice, you could simply have grabbed some from the fridge in this room.”

“I wanted soda, remember? Anyway, how’s the game going, Mr. Nakata?”

“I-I’m giving it my best shot!”

Right as I said that, my character fell off another cliff and died. Death by walking was some bull, if you asked me. Back when I played games, the characters hadn’t been so frail that they died from every tiny thing. The controls were also a lot easier back then, if I did say so myself.

Octavia ignored me and focused her attention on the game, leaving me with no choice but to try again—just to see if I would have the same result—and once more fall to my death.

“Wow. You really suck. You’ll make me cry.”

“Don’t rub it in!”

“You must lead such a productive life. Just the sight of someone so offline makes me happy. Go on, keep playing.”

“What, and keep dying? That’s what it feels like you’re telling me!”

“Don’t be rude. You’ll always come back after you die…just to die again.”

“Don’t jinx me. Oh no. Oh no! Argh! When did I get so bad at this?”

“Ha ha.”

“Who says ‘ha ha’ out loud like a creep?!”

Vince sat down on the carpet next to me as we bantered. Octavia’s eyes remained glued to the TV screen the entire time. She said, “This game is nice. Plenty of people die, but I’m not attached to any of them. They can die as many times as they need.”

She mowed down the enemies in her way while she talked. She casually shot down a mountain of a man, muscled beyond belief, with a shotgun. She never missed a bullet. She never tripped. She just shot. Walked over. Ran away. Ducked behind cover. Shot. Blew down an opponent. Shot. Shot. Shot.

I was quietly moved by the intricacy of these modern video game action sequences. When a complete amateur like me was allowed to do whatever we wanted, we soon stopped playing altogether. The proper playstyle was a must to get the most out of this game. It wasn’t one that could be played when someone was distraught. Based on what little I had gleaned from straining my ears through the door, Octavia and Vince were in the midst of a tiff. She hadn’t been all that calm with me, either. Yet, when she played, she snapped into focus like a meditating monk. Her face was as expressionless as crystal, like earlier, but I no longer felt the same negative emotions from her. Maybe the game served like an intermediary between me and her.

It was too late to turn back. *Now let’s see if I can’t warm up to this game.*

I picked up the controller again and watched my character’s sudden death for the fourth time. Some opponent—not Octavia—had shot me down from across the map. *Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry,* I apologized to the other characters, all being played like pros. I still didn’t understand the controls at all. To some extent, me dying was just business. Still, it felt weird to simply die over and over without saying anything. Taking a page out of Richard’s book, I took a proactive step and put my newly learned word to use.

“Oh no, not another game over. Ughhh. That’s grass.”

“Argh, I fell! That’s major grass.”

“Not again! Grass!”

Grass, grass, grass. A stream of grass. My mood tanked as I grumbled about this grasshole game.

Vince's back had been quietly twitching for quite some time before he looked at me with an expression like he couldn't take it any longer. I wasn't sure if he was on the verge of tears or blowing up at me. What was his problem?

"Mr. Nakata…you don't use that word when talking about yourself."

"Huh? Really?"

To my surprise, Vince bit his lower lip and turned away from me. What was that reaction all about? He could have at least told me what the word meant.

Oblivious to my frustration, Vince muttered under his breath, "This is a real prairie moment."

"Huh? So there's both grass and prairies?"

Vince groaned and hid his face in his hands. Just as I started to wonder what the heck was wrong with him, I heard a peal of laughter behind me. Octavia's.

It was the first time I had ever heard her laugh. Although she understood only a little Japanese, she evidently found our conversation hilarious. Oddly, I felt grateful—for the first time in my life—for a single Japanese word. Thanks, grass. Thanks, *kusa*. I still didn't know what it meant, but it was a great word.

Now, for the first time ever, it felt like there was a bridge between us leading to an open door. Maybe it was as tenuous as a single white string, but it was there.

"You know, I…I'd like to get better at this game," I said—in English, of course. But Octavia looked at me like I'd just spoken gobbledygook. Her face was perplexed.

"Why not learn from Vince?"

"I want to get better and play with you. Is that kind of judgment really such a bad thing?"

Octavia's face went doll-like again when I brought up the topic we had been discussing prior to the game. Silently, the door slammed shut. But it wasn't locked tight, I didn't think. So long as

there was a hair's breadth of space for light to creep through, that was all I needed. I wanted to believe in that light.

"...That isn't something I want."

"You sure? Maybe it is."

"You're asking me to accept your judgment on a *maybe*."

Yes, if that was possible for her. I told her so, and that it hinged upon if—and this was a big if—she could accept my thoughts and feelings. But I thought she could.

"Because you and I can play games together. Right?"

"Like I said already, what's wrong with playing with Vince?"

"I don't want to play with Vince. I want to play with you."

"Ouch. I'm being left out over here. I feel pretty grassy myself."

"What is with you two and all this grass?"

Octavia almost laughed again before catching herself and struggling to tamp it down. As terrible as I was at this shooter game, I recognized that "cover fire" for what it was—Octavia's version of having my back against Vince's teasing. I thanked her internally and bit back the slight pang of annoyance that I had to thank her at all. Still, I was a hundred times more grateful than annoyed.

"*Grass* is used when something makes you laugh, you know."

"It is?"

Grass equaled laughter. The Japanese word for grass = laughter. I had never heard that before. *Wait, hold on. Let me think. If I treat it like an analogy...*

Oh. I had it. Maybe. Grass meant laughter because...

"A laughingstock is an *owaraigusa*. Shorten that, and you get *kusa*!"

Now it was Vince's turn to burst out laughing at every wheeze of Japanese. "Mister...Nakata, you're...a genius. Brill-i-ant!"

Octavia joined in with that awkward laugh of her own. I must not have been right, but that didn't matter. Vince knew the extent of Octavia's Japanese vocabulary, so the list of Octavia's Japanese teachers—after the first two private tutors, college students in

Cambridge's course of Japanese language studies—probably included Vince as the latest addition to the lineup. I hadn't been sure upon witnessing their first interaction, but now I knew for certain. Vince and Octavia's relationship transcended a financial, I'll-scratch-your-back-you-scratch-mine partnership.

"Japanese sure is hard," I said. That was only half a joke, too, but because I said it with such a troubled frown, it only made Vince laugh harder. Octavia told him off for being rude, to which he waved off with a half-baked apology.

Without warning, she adopted a tone I'd never heard before. "Oh, you silly. You sure do love games. You only stick around because I play with you, isn't that right?"

"What? Nah. That's not true."

"Of course it is! Don't tease me."

I knew three things. That Vince was super, super worried for his wife, Marian. That he had to leave Marian all alone to be with Octavia. That his reason for doing so had nothing to do with video games or even money. But he had never said—and, I knew, would never say—a word of that to Octavia. Not a peep. He acted like a troublesome if unenthusiastic big kid and stayed with Octavia to learn more about her and help us—Richard and me—in secret.

Why did he have to do it this way? Why was any of this necessary?

There must have been another player in the equation. Someone I didn't know yet. Some person who caused Vince to act like this.

After grassing so many times I lost count, I spoke up again. "Can I ask something?"

Octavia, sipping from a bottle of orange juice with a straw, said, "What?" A light acknowledgment of my question. Her eyes never left the TV.

"It's not that important, but something's been bugging me. Something to do with someone else," I added before I went any further.

The crease in her forehead relaxed by a hair. I had never expected the bargaining skills I had learned in the Ratnapura

jewelry trade to come in handy here. I called this tactic the final push before the end, and it was exactly what it sounded like.

"How did you know about Deborah's divorce? Not to mention all the things about Richard and me. Who told you?"

"...A man named Laurent. The head butler for the Claremont family."

Finally, I had a name to put to a shadowy figure. Laurent. I recited it to myself a few times to commit to memory. At long last, the big rat had finally shown its tail.

"So this Laurent person..."

"You're dying again, Mr. Nakata."

"Oh no! Prairie!" Vince teased, causing a distraction to draw away Octavia's ire. It was partially for her sake, I figured, and partially to keep her from exploding on me again.

"Oh please, you've run that joke into the ground."

"Here, you take over for me," I said, and I handed him the controller and stepped away.

"It was a fine attempt, Mr. Nakata. You are now dismissed," Octavia said in a calm, moderated tone.

Just then, I heard the creak of the hallway door. My brow creased in concern. Come to think of it, Octavia had said something similar when she had had the two burly bodyguards escort me out. In an effort to leave on my own steam, I stepped back into the connecting room. Sure enough, both bodyguards were waiting for me. I promised that I was leaving as I scurried into the hallway. Thanks to that, they left me alone this time. No getting turned into a Seigi and beefcake sandwich for me.

But now the question begged: What next?

Octavia wasn't going to listen to me. She was willing to play video games with me, but it would have taken too much time to have her open up to me over the course of many gaming sessions. Worse, learning to play like her would have required the same level of brutal training as my apprenticeship in jewelry. Video games couldn't be learned overnight. I needed a more feasible plan.

Not like I would come up with one mooning over it on my own, though, so I started for the stairs in the hopes of finding someone who could help me. Footsteps alerted me of someone else on the way up, marching at a brisk pace. *Please,* I thought. *Let it be him.* I pictured a familiar face.

My prayers were answered. “Richard!”

The gorgeous man dashed up to the third floor as he fixed a few hairs that had come askew.

“Are you okay? Did something happen?”

“I am perfectly well, thank you. You have nothing to be concerned about.”

The suspense was killing me. I begged him to tell me what on Earth could have taken him so long. Richard grumbled that he’d been forced to decipher Japanese cursive, a kind of calligraphy style, in a room filled with dessert after dessert. It was like untying a knot in a string that went on and on, as he decoded an album of memories—texts he’d studied with Octavia and Deborah. I barely even knew what cursive was—presumably some sort of tactic to waste Richard’s time and keep the two of us apart. Octavia had wanted to talk to me but avoid Richard.

“But let us turn to more important matters. Did you speak with Octavia, Seigi?”

“Yes, just now. In that room right there…”

I explained that I had played a shooter game with her and Vince…just as another figure climbed up the stairs and joined us.

“Huh? Is that…?”

My immediate impression was that something wasn’t quite right. A sense that here was a stranger—sort of. A person I knew but didn’t. I did a double take. As impossible as it was to believe, there was no mistaking it. I knew this man.

“Henry!”

He wore a smart, long, black felt coat with a charcoal-colored scarf around his shoulders. His hair was platinum blond, going grey in more than a few places. However, it meshed so well with the other cream-colored strands that for a split second I wondered if it was a fashion statement. The look was completed by a black suit, a

pair of black shoes, and a walking stick. Its grip was silver and shaped like a rabbit's head.

Elegance. Sophistication. An outfit redolent with dignity. He possessed neither Jeffrey's calculated superficiality nor Richard's scrupulous elegance. He dressed like he had come straight out of a fantasy story.

Henry approached me on quiet, graceful steps. He smiled and extended his hand toward me before removing his black leather gloves. Every part of that movement screamed nobility so loudly that I felt awkward standing in front of him. I couldn't help it. I gaped at him and didn't know what to say.

Henry gave me a small smile and spoke first. *"High, doe moe."*

"Sorry...what?"

"Cone knee chee waah."

This English gentleman may have had kind features and eyes as blue as gemstones that twinkled with a limitless affection, but he spoke truly terrible Japanese.

He continued in the same broken speech style. "My name is Henry Claremont. Long time no see, Mr. Nakata."

"Uh, yeah. Good to see you, too."

"I have picked up some Japanese."

"W-wow. You're incredible!"

"Thank you. You flatter me."

His pronunciation of the polite copula *desu* was elegant in a way that I couldn't put into words. I fought for dear life to not burst out laughing, buffeted by the hurricane winds of the disparity between his appearance and his baby Japanese.

It went without saying that this was Henry. Yet the man behind him was not Jeffrey. This other man wore a grey suit that wasn't exactly resort wear, either. I figured he was in his early fifties or so. His cheeks were red as apples—whether from exertion or some other cause, I didn't know—and framed by thin strands of hair welded into place, a mustache, and a goatee. His eyes were as blue as the sky on a clear day.

Who was this man? I had never seen him before. Yet before I could ask, Henry said, “This is my butler.”

His butler. More than the appearance of this figure I had been hearing so much about, I was surprised that Henry knew the Japanese word for butler. *Good job, Haruyoshi,* I thought, sending a wave of gratitude emanating toward Spain. The “You flatter me” bit—that was great, too. It felt very Henry. But there was no way on Earth that Haruyoshi could ever have imagined his Japanese lessons would have been used like this.

I was also surprised that Henry had arrived long before we were expecting him. It just didn’t feel right—having Henry here but not Jeffrey, that is. Back during the time I threw the diamond, and during the resulting fallout, Jeffrey had been glued to Henry’s hip like his personal nurse. If Jeffrey wasn’t here, had Henry not gotten in touch with him first?

Picking up on my unease, Henry responded—this time in English—with a whispered comment in my ear. “Jeffrey was tired, so he is presently taking a nap in one of the rooms on the ground floor. He messaged me and asked me to wake him upon my arrival, but I’ve opted to let him sleep. He’s worked far too hard throughout this whole affair, if you ask me. I told him he needn’t come to Sri Lanka, I would take care of it. Evidently, he has ignored me and chosen to overwork himself in the bargain. I cannot thank him enough for all he’s done for me, and so I must let him sleep. So help me, I will kill that man myself if that’s what it takes to make him rest.”

That last line sounded ominous to me. I stole a quick peek at Richard, but the beautiful man was pretending he hadn’t heard anything and facing the other way. To be exact, he was looking at the door to the room that Octavia and Vince occupied.

The butler, to whom I’d now been introduced, frowned in irritation. He whispered something in his master’s ear, too low for me to catch it, but Henry brushed him off and turned back to me. “So, Mr. Nakata, I take it you’ve met Octavia. What did she have to say to you?”

There, on the red carpet in that hallway, I told them as much information as I could. I did not tell them she was contemplating the leading cause of death for Japanese citizens between the ages

of fifteen and thirty-five, but I did say she was still deeply depressed, had no enmity toward either Richard or Deborah, and wanted their happiness—albeit in an extremely odd way.

The butler kept pulling faces and muttering to himself, “Preposterous!” or “What poppycock!” Henry paid him no attention at all.

“Did anything else happen to come up within your conversation, Mr. Nakata? Any names, perchance? Places?”

“Well…”

I knew what Henry was hinting at, and I felt a wave of relief. I had been concerned that he knew nothing, but if anything, he was probably more knowledgeable about this situation than Richard or me. Above all else, I knew he would never betray us. The reports of his heart-to-heart with Haruyoshi were proof of that.

That was why I played my final card. “Yes. She mentioned a person named Laurent. The head butler of the Claremont family.”

An uncomfortable silence followed before Henry smiled and turned to look over his shoulder. His butler, now glaring like a sullen guard, didn’t say anything, either. He fixed his gaze on the empty space between Henry and me.

“How curious, Laurent. Why would your name be mentioned, pray tell?”

“…You do so enjoy your little jests, young master.”

“I most certainly do. In fact, I’m sure you expected this outcome from the very moment I chose to bring you along on this trip.”

“Preposterous, young master.”

Richard interrupted. “Harry.” Today, Richard had ditched his usual formal suit due to the six-hour-long ride in favor of a looser blue-grey number. Next to his cousin, who was dressed in all black, Richard looked less like a stereotypical boss than Henry.

Henry smiled, affable to the bitter end. “It’s quite all right, Richard. I have made enormous leaps and bounds in my recovery.”

“As Jeffrey is currently resting, I can’t help but wonder if we might postpone this conversation for a short while.”

“Oh, no. This is my oxygen tank. Without it, I dare not plunge down to the depths for long, but I can certainly manage a short free dive. I came here for one sole reason: to show you—and, if possible, Mr. Nakata—this ledger.”

Henry pulled an object out of his breast pocket. It was a thick notebook, like a diary. Even before he opened it, I could tell that the paper was old and faded. Its red cover had a couple of words written on it in an elegant script: Leandra Claremont’s Register of Jewels.

Oh. Was that *the* ledger? Wait, but there was more—one more name on that leather cover. Its handwriting looked slightly different, so it must have been someone else’s signature. I had to strain my eyes to make out the faint writing. It was a full name, a Caroline M… something. The M part was the beginning of a last name. Manorlan—oh. I knew what the name was.

“Can you read it, Mr. Nakata? I would imagine neither you nor Richard should require an explanation. The Garrets have been the family trustees for generations, but it appears that my grandmother Leah kept one additional trustee. To prevent any damage to her secret accounting books, she arranged for a spare set to be kept with this individual. This second trustee’s name is written on this very book.”

Caroline Manorland. Which meant…

Henry’s black coat billowed as he turned to face the butler standing behind him. Now it was the three of us versus the one of him.

“Laurent, was your goal to retrieve the second ledger passed down to Octavia Manorland? Is that why you have assisted the girl with her willful demands?”

Laurent said nothing.

A second secret ledger. Was that a real thing? Apparently so. Well, that was one mystery solved. This explained why the Claremont butlers were helping Octavia. I had found it difficult to believe so many servants could have such strongly negative feelings about a master like Richard—someone so radiantly gorgeous and endlessly kind. But if their goal was to retrieve something related to the fake jewelry, then that was a different story.

Laurent looked the three of us in the eyes. His face hadn't moved a muscle since Henry dropped his accusation. *Oh bother,* it seemed to say. It was tired, and nothing else.

"The man you serve does not appreciate idle silence. Speak, Laurent."

"…The man I serve is the current Lord Claremont, *young master*. The ninth Earl of Claremont. The Lord Godfrey."

"Indeed, that is so. You have served our family tirelessly since I was but a boy. Now my father stands on death's door, leaving me the authority to act in his stead for all matters pertaining to his estate. My orders carry the same weight as any from Lord Godfrey himself. Care to argue that, Laurent?"

"…The young master will pardon me for saying so, but some matters may be difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, it is time you knew," Laurent said, a preface to the rest of his speech. He looked straight at Henry. "Henry Claremont, this whole affair is entirely your fault."

The sentence was a knife meant to stab deep into Henry's heart.

Fire blazed in Richard's eyes. Had Jeffrey been here, Laurent would have been in real danger—anything that had fired up Richard so badly would have had a worse effect on Jeffrey.

Before Richard could jump down Laurent's throat, a hand rose in front of Richard's face. It was Henry's hand. His palm stopped Richard in his tracks as if it had said Enough. Henry's hand was large—larger than Richard's, his fingers even longer than Jeffrey's. The weight he had lost made his hands look gnarled and boney. Did all piano players' hands look like that, I wondered.

"What is that supposed to mean, Laurent? Explain yourself."

"Must I? Good heavens, young master, can you not imagine the absurd strain—mentally *and* physically—this fuss with the diamond inheritance has placed on your servants? I am a modern man, young master, and I do not think poorly of those who must battle their inner demons. But you, sir, put up all too little of a fight. Could you not have attempted to maintain at least a shred of dignity as the next Earl of Claremont? Were that not enough, you

quarreled with our dear young master Richard—a man you loved like a brother, sir!—and plotted to destroy his engagement. What asini—forgive me, I have spoken out of turn. I shan't say anything more."

"No, let's hear it. State your piece."

After Laurent had gone that far, I wasn't sure if we needed to hear anything further. I almost stepped in to tell Laurent he'd gone too far, but Richard motioned me to stop. This two-legged snake in the grass wore that same expression of exhaustion as he continued. I doubted he was really all that tired. Surely he wouldn't have been able to drone on so long otherwise.

"It concerns your fiancée, young master."

"Ah, I see."

Henry had a fiancée? That was news to me. Well, he was older than Jeffrey, after all. Come to think of it, it was more surprising that he wasn't married at all. Even if he was a real-life "golden bachelor," it would have only been natural for him to have a fiancée.

Henry laughed and cut Laurent off before he could say anything else.

"Am I to understand this is a segue into a discussion of my failed engagement?"

"The young master refuses to speak of such matters, or so I am told."

"That is only what I tell the public, as you well know. My ex-fiancée has made it known that even if we were to have married, it is doubtful we could have built a happy life together. We were little more than acquaintances to begin with, and so our engagement ended with as little fuss and fanfare as it began. Yet I suppose, once again, we must question whether I am the culpable party."

"...Young master, what possesses you to act like such a disgrace when you know full well what you are doing? Furthermore, you should never have come here. Your place is at Lord Godfrey's bedside. Why traipse halfway across the globe to this Asian backwater, just to scold me? I have spent my whole life in service to your father, and this is the thanks I get!"

“Are you concerned about me being there for my father’s final moments? Don’t. I will return in time.”

“You cannot possibly know that. No one can.”

“Yes, Laurent, I am aware. But let me answer your other question: Why come all this way despite my many disgraces? You see, Laurent…”

Every time Henry said that name, a chill traveled down my spine. I didn’t know why. It was like a wizard casting an ice spell.

“What’s done cannot be undone. I’ve learned this very well myself after what happened to me, to Richard, to Jeffrey, to Octavia, and to any of our respective fiancées. I have been a captive of the past for far too long. I grew reluctant to move on from any of these tragedies. But that line of thinking changed nothing, so I have chosen to move forward regardless of the disgraces I continue to bring to our family. Hence why I am here. I do hope you can understand my feelings, even if only partially.”

Laurent fell silent.

“Incidentally, Laurent, I recall you know some Japanese. I always felt rather lonely when I was a child, watching you speak with Richard or Jeffrey. I envied you. However, I dare say I know a few words in Japanese you don’t.”

It was clear from the baffled look on Laurent’s face that he didn’t understand what Henry meant. Henry just smiled quietly. He was as unmoving as the massive mountains of rock looming above the tea fields all across the six-hour train ride. Then the future Earl of Claremont tore off his warm smile of a mask. A second later, he donned the mask of a furious demon.

In broken Japanese, he snarled, “You’re a fucking asshole. You have a lot of goddamn nerve to say this crap to my face. I don’t have to sit here and take your bullshit. Why don’t you pull your head out of your ass and use it for once in your son-of-a-bitch life? Douchebag.”

…

It felt like the largest cyclone in history had just swept through that antique corridor. The wind speeds were off the charts. Richard looked like he was ascending to another plane of existence, and I

joined him. So did Laurent. He clearly didn't understand the vocabulary, but he could tell this was no ordinary exchange from our reactions. His face was a cross between confusion and fear. I think anyone would have freaked out when snarled at by this skeleton of a man.

Henry smiled that same self-composed smile. It was more awe-inspiring than frightening. This hotel tucked away in the mountains of Sri Lanka, which looked the same as it ever did since the nineteenth century, had probably provided temporary lodgings to many English aristocrats. In fact, here stood one of them now. It was like the entirety of this massive building was on Henry's side.

"Those were some choice words I learned from a friend of mine. To be perfectly frank, I have nothing else to say to you but that. I'm afraid you might not have understood the Japanese, so let me repeat myself in English."

Richard, who had been frozen up to this point, leaned toward me. I thought he was scared and wanted me to hold his hand, but that wasn't it. For some strange reason, he started to cover my ears before he thought better of it and stopped. What, did he not think this was the kind of language a growing boy should hear? Granted, I was plenty alarmed, too, but Richard looked far more disturbed than I was.

"Let us make an end to all this."

"T-to all what, sir?"

"Listen and I'll tell you. Let us end this tangled mass of old loves and old hatreds, this perverted puzzle of a familial relationship that I inadvertently caused. The seventh Earl of Claremont left behind a time bomb of a will to protect his son, the eighth earl. In doing so, the love my cousin, my brother, and I shared rotted like a worm-eaten apple. I envied Richard terribly—I envied this boy who I loved like a brother—and when my real brother tried to save me, we forced Richard to flee and disappear into the Eastern Hemisphere. We were motivated by the same force that compelled Leah to get her hands dirty, to reign as the shadow queen of high society from behind a smokescreen of gemstones both real and fake. She did it all to protect her husband, the man she loved, from judging us. And you and your people are doing your utmost to erase all record of

her deeds? A little sacrifice, you insist, must be made to let my father pass away in peace. Yet everything in this little book is love. Laurent, this book is a testimony to her love. Sometimes it is loving someone with all our heart that drives us to do terrible things."

At those words, Henry glanced at me and shot me a smile.

I would never have tried to make light of what I'd done with a phrase as pretty as "I did it all for love." I threw the diamond for my own self-satisfaction. Nothing more. I even said as much to Richard, and at this point, the whole affair was nothing but a painful memory to me. But that naive sentiment had never reached Octavia. A broken shard of the shattered curse was still lodged in her heart.

Henry went on, "You've demanded accountability and fortitude from me, but there is no longer much point to that. What's done is done. No matter how resilient I become, no matter how much effort I expend or how many prayers I recite, I cannot undo the past. I could beg God to take away everything I have—my fortune, even my life—in return for being as close with my brother and cousin as I was prior to the broken engagement. What good would it do? God would not answer my prayers. And, perhaps arrogantly, I no longer pray for that. Do you know, I am convinced that this ordeal has made the three of us closer than ever?"

"What foolish self-serving claptrap!"

"Most certainly it is. It is as foolish as foolish can be. But is there such a thing as a person who is never even a little bit foolish at all? Could you even call such a person human? Would you rather I be a human being or live out the rest of my life like an unproblematic poppet, fretting within the confines of a tiny room?"

"Perhaps the latter. I dare say it is the better option."

"Indeed? I see. Then I'm afraid our paths have diverged completely."

Laurent meant that Henry deserved to die for his great disgrace. Henry took that comment to his face and deflected it with his disagreement. This was a heavyweight boxing match of words as cold as absolute zero. I almost thought it would have been better to go back to cussing each other out, but maybe that had only been Henry's way of apologizing in advance—forewarning us that he was

about to say something *really* scary, but that everything would turn out all right.

When, I wondered, did Henry grow such a strong backbone?

As Laurent struggled for words, I heard once again the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. (The hotel had no elevator.) Jeffrey staggered into view gasping for breath and still fumbling to do up the last buttons on his shirt.

"Henry. I'm so sorry. I fell asleep. I can't believe it. I can't believe I slept through your arrival. Who's this? Laurent? What's he doing here? Of all the people to take to Sri Lanka, you pick the biggest fuddy-duddy on staff?"

Oh, Jeffrey.

Finally, all the main players were here. The three "brothers" of the Claremont family, the mastermind of the butlers, and—on the other side of the door—Octavia. Her door showed no signs of opening any time soon. She must have heard the argument and was choosing to ignore it.

There were dark rings under Jeffrey's eyes. He was the only one of us who had yet to realize what was going on.

"Huh? What were you guys talking about when I walked up? Yowch. You look angry, Harry."

"Jeff."

"Are you feeling okay? Here, why don't you take a break? Although I can understand your eagerness to jump straight into the showdown when there's a cute young lady waiting for you!"

I felt my heart turn to ice. Jeffrey was not on the same page as everyone else in the room. He was the only one who, for some reason, was acting unnaturally bubbly. It was the usual Jeffrey persona, not the one he would have chosen for this face-off if he had been in his right mind. Something must have thrown him off. Was he okay? I meant, like, really. Maybe he needed to check into one of these hotel rooms and get a few more winks of sleep.

Henry seemed to agree with me, as he turned to his dear little brother and said his name again. "Jeff." It was surprisingly commanding to my ears. "Tell me the terms you offered."

"...Huh? What terms?"

“What, I repeat, are the terms you offered? Your personal secretary’s betrayal has been weighing on my mind since the moment I heard about it. I cannot imagine them telling anyone what sort of business they perform for you. How, then, did anyone know you had Mr. Nakata’s passport information? A hacker would not have known. An insider must have been involved. Why did you never tell us, Jeffrey? Were you being forced to make another terrible choice? Tell us. Tell us what happened.”

A heavy silence descended over the hallway. I knew Octavia and Vince were still there, just a door away, but the silence was so pervasive, it felt like we’d been cut off from the rest of the world. We all looked at Jeffrey.

He tilted his head to the side in mock confusion. “Where’s this misunderstanding coming from? I already told you everything that happened. There’s nothing else to share.”

“Not all hackers attack from the outside. Let’s say, for instance, that you attempted to destroy an HDD involved in the incident but neglected to be as thorough as you should have been. For the price of a luxury car, some professionals can take a broken PC and return a complete record of everything the machine was used for. Retrieving information is no challenge to someone with enough time and money. That is, someone like me. Do not lie to me, Jeff.”

All blood drained from Jeffrey’s face, and his lips turned a pallid white. Henry looked at him with pity but no mercy.

“Jeff. One of the butlers had your secretary steal Mr. Nakata’s personal electronic records. Isn’t that right?”

“...I-Is it?”

“Which is why you feel responsible for what Laurent has done.”

“No, wha—what are you talking about? No, you have the wrong idea.”

“Oh? But we were just talking about this.”

“You have the wrong idea, I swear! You’re completely wrong.”

“You always try to keep Richard and me out of harm’s way.”

“No, that’s not true! That’s not—”

“Which is why you sacrificed yourself.”

Silence.

A wisp of a smile materialized on Jeffrey's pale face. How could he possibly smile at a time like this? Something slipped from his mouth—maybe a sigh, maybe not—as this eternally cheerful big brother figure stood rooted to the floor.

"I don't...know what you're talking about."

"Jeff, I read all the emails. Every one of them."

"You sure? How many were there?"

"Three thousand or so. Not a lot, in the grand scheme of things."

"...Oopsies."

Jeffrey feigned embarrassment with that pasted-on smile. Behind him, I heard another sigh. This one sounded almost like a tongue click, although maybe I was just imagining that. I had to tell myself it was just my mind playing tricks on me, because I didn't have the confidence that I could restrain myself otherwise. Laurent really, really should not have made that noise, especially when Richard, right next to me, was on the cusp of blowing his own lid.

"This family has gone to the dogs."

"Stop it, Laurent. Don't say anything!"

"I see both brothers are infected with this same wretched naivety. And here I thought young master Jeffrey might have been less of a sentimental fool."

"I said, that's enough! We're not talking about this here. You promised."

"If you wanted me to honor that promise, you should have held up your end of the bargain, young master Jeffrey."

Laurent addressed all three Claremonts as "young master." As a butler, he would have served the family for many years and known each of its youngest members from childhood. But that didn't mean he got to treat them like children forever. What did this man think an employer/employee relationship was?

Before my unsuitable anger overtook me, Henry spoke up. He wasn't upset, or if he was, he didn't look it—at least from the outside. The smile on his face was perfectly calm as he stared down

Laurent; it was as pleasant as if he was enjoying the touch of a refreshing breeze on his cheeks. Goosebumps prickled on my back. Here was a front-row seat to an English gentleman boxing an insolent opponent.

"Would you kindly confirm that I have all the facts, Laurent? You forced Jeffrey to promise you that, in return for you not badgering Richard or me to do the same, it would be his duty to produce a legitimate heir for the Claremont family as quickly as possible."

An heir? A legitimate heir. Well, this was a sudden plot twist. An heir entailed marrying and having kids. What business did a butler have with something that personal?

I—and another person—stared blank-faced while Henry and Richard fixed Laurent with their sternest frowns. My fellow brother of the blank-faced bunch, Jeffrey, lurched into action a beat too late and yelled at Laurent, "Fine! Fine! Enough is enough! I'll do it. I'll get married and have a proper, legitimate heir and everything. Just stop antagonizing my brothers!"

Jeffrey's outburst raised one question, and one question only. I had to check.

So, it was true? Everything Henry said was true? Really, really true?

In the earlier discussion of Henry's failed engagement, Laurent's look of disgust said, "You know nothing." He wasn't dismayed about the broken relationship, a casualty of Henry's illness. No, his distress stemmed from there being no legitimate heir to this familial line with so few successors.

Henry was already in his forties and still had no children or even, as I had just learned, a fiancée. Jeffrey was a freewheeling bachelor. I recalled some mention of a girlfriend, but I had never heard more about her than that she existed. Richard was close to thirty and showed no sign of getting married any time soon. Although it was certainly possible, depending on how things turned out now—

Oh. *Oh.* Was *that* what this was all about?

Was that why the butlers—on behalf of all the Claremont family servants—had assisted Octavia's plot? Not just to retrieve the fake jewelry before it caused trouble later down the line but to secure an heir? And through that, a stable future for their jobs and the jobs of all the servants?

Laurent frowned like he was disgusted with the entire world. "Young master, I beg you to understand. The earldom and your family's lineage are not your personal property."

"Oh, do you have more to say? Go on. I will allow you to say your piece, provided you keep it short."

"Your arrogance astounds me! Lord Godfrey was the finest master a butler could ask for. I knew no man kinder to his servants. He raised two sons and, yes, a third child as well, and here you all are completely unable to have so much as a single son or daughter among you! Who do you think you are to have such cheek?!"

I didn't understand what Laurent's issue was. All the words made sense individually, but what was he doing, saying this in the twenty-first century?

Henry steadied Jeffrey with a hand on his shoulder and smiled calmly at Laurent. "I see. This is a matter of your employment."

"Indeed it is, and I am glad to see you finally understand. Should the Claremont bloodline end here…"

The earldom would be no more. That is, it would go back to the country of Great Britain.

Plenty of people, hearing that, would have volunteered to inherit the Claremont's behemoth fortune. Personally, I would have been worried about someone cropping up and claiming to be an illegitimate child, but that wasn't Laurent's concern.

An earl's family, he said, was like a company.

"A company has employees on all levels. Naturally, it is made up of so much more than the president and the board of directors. So, too, within the Claremont family, we have those who maintain the gardens, those who polish the silverware, those who drive the cars, and those who manage the schedules and finances. If some vagabond wanders in from who-knows-where and claims to be the heir, do you imagine every one of the staff would keep their jobs?

May I remind you just how many of the great old manor houses of England are looked after by the National Trust these days?"

If the earl's family was like a company, then a lost bloodline was like bankruptcy. That meant the current servants losing their jobs. The Claremont assets could have provided generous severance packages, but those would eventually run out, leaving them needing to find new work. I wondered what luck an ex-maid or ex-footman could have in the modern-day job market.

"Some millionaires in the Middle East are happy to offer a sizable paycheck to anyone with experience waiting on members of the English aristocracy. It is quite possible that some of us could earn more there than we did under Lord Godfrey. However, our hearts belong to England. None of us have the slightest desire to leave our homeland and our families to work in the UAE, Oman, or Saudi Arabia. Likewise, many of us descend from families proud to have been in the earls' services for generations. You might think us little more than puppets, but I promise you we have perfectly respectable wills of our own."

My ears picked up a hurried mutter from the person standing next to Henry. "No, no, it's fine. There's no need to tell them that part." It was Jeffrey talking to himself. He looked exhausted, and his tone was just as lifeless, but I did feel like some of the fight was back in him. Enough to answer simple questions, at least.

But Henry acted like he hadn't heard him, keeping his eyes trained on Laurent. He looked at Laurent with the same interest as if he was watching a program on television.

"Is that all?"

"...So long as you finally understand."

"I repeat, is that all?"

This time, Laurent said nothing. He looked down at the floor. Evidently, it *was* all.

Suddenly, Henry's gaze shifted. Jeffrey looked slightly alarmed.

"Oh, Jeff." Henry stroked his beloved brother's cheek. "For one little man, you do cause no end of heartache."

"...It's my fault for taking matters into my own hands. Don't feel bad for me."

“Jeff, I love you. You always try to take on the worst, the heaviest and sharpest, burdens. I understand that I’ve always let you, but…”

He paused.

“…You don’t need to carry those burdens anymore, Jeff.”

He cupped Jeffrey’s cheeks in both hands, oh so gently, as if carrying a handful of precious water to his lips. Henry’s hands looked stiff and cold but were filled with unbelievable care and tenderness. Jeffrey’s eyes widened, dumbfounded, like a person whose efforts had received unexpected recognition, or a child who’d been caught doing mischief but let off without a scolding. Even so, the assembly line of his face lurched into gear and crafted his usual smile. There were thick walls around Jeffrey. Walls so massive, I didn’t know how to break through them.

“Thanks, Harry. But I could say the same to you. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you overworking yourself these days. It worries me. Come on—you read all those emails, and for what?”

“Jeff.”

“It was just a bunch of banter. Me and a guy friend chatting, to be honest.”

“I want you to understand. You and I are equal now. You don’t need to boost me up any longer.”

“No, no, no. You don’t need to worry so much. I’ll make this heir thing work, I promise. I had a girlfriend in Pennsylvania long before any of this talk about rushing to have kids.”

“Philadelphia, was it?”

“Hm?”

“The last time you mentioned your girlfriend, you said she was in Philadelphia. Prior to that, it was Boston.”

Jeffrey clammed up before stammering, “Oh…right. To tell you the truth, the Boston girl and I broke up. But things will work out this time. We don’t have to worry about the whole racial background thing anymore, so I can pick whoever I like. Don’t lose any sleep over this.”

“Jeff.”

“Things will work out.”

“Jeff, don’t make me say it.”

“I mean it, things will work out. What am I not making you say?”

“You know I really don’t want to say this.”

“Come on, Harry. I’m down to hear anything. Just tell me.”

His smile was a sandcastle just a second before the waves washed it away. White sand, like the pallor of his face in this moment. So fragile that the castle could come crashing down at any time—even without a touch, a touch of the waves or a touch of a human hand. Walls ready to collapse, should a single molecule of air brush against them.

Henry hesitated. Opened his mouth. Spoke.

“I met the one in New York.”

“…What?”

“Your partner is lovely. I’m quite fond.”

“…Wh-what?”

“Why don’t you bring Joachim around sometime? I suggested we have dinner. I’m sorry, Jeff, but I didn’t stop at reading your messages. I checked all your contacts myself and found him at number fifty-four on your list. His existence was the information Laurent weaponized against you, wasn’t it?”

Wait, Joachim? Who was that? Before the confusion could show on my face, Jeffrey collapsed. He clapped a hand over his mouth and made a horrifying noise, almost a scream, that filled the entire hallway. Richard ran to him and stroked his back, but Jeffrey didn’t regain his feet. He couldn’t. He was stuck fast to the red carpet.

I didn’t know who this Joachim person was, but I did recognize that Joachim was a man’s name. And I realized exactly what Henry was trying to say. *I’m so glad Henry spoke up in time,* I thought, and I had the funniest feeling of relief. I was truly, truly happy that Henry had brought this to light before Jeffrey tried to have his “happily ever after” with some random woman.

Jeffrey looked like he was ready to cry. I had never seen him look this devastated before. It was like watching a satellite shoot a laser beam that turned the Great Wall of China to ash. The English word *overkill* flashed through my mind, like when I had seen it on the TV screen earlier today. Jeffrey couldn't stand. He was completely, totally paralyzed.

Henry squatted on Jeffrey's other side and rubbed his back like rubbing salt in his wound in the kindest, gentlest way possible. "Now you've learned the hard way, Jeff. This is what happens when you show off pictures of your latest 'girlfriend' that you sourced from some poor stranger's Facebook account. You never know who might have seen the pictures before."

"...I need to throw up. I'm going to throw up, right now."

"By all means, please do. You've bottled up everything for so long just to protect me. Thank you, Jeff. But you don't need to do that anymore. It's okay. I'm an adult, too, you know. In fact, I'm even older than you."

"It's not okay! I'm not okay."

"You will be, I promise. I'll make sure of it."

Maybe that wasn't what Jeffrey meant by "I'm not okay." Maybe he was begging for mercy, for no more overkill. For the briefest of moments, I considered saying that, but I lost my opportunity when a sigh of disgust filled the hallway.

Laurent placed a hand to his face and muttered under his breath, "What an utter farce. I came all the way to the mountains of Sri Lanka for this? I worry for my master. Are you telling me, then, that young master Jeffey is not capable of making good on his promise? I shall not be so gauche as to comment on your proclivities, but why not father a child and then go play house with Chim or Han or whatever other man you fancy? The solution is so simple that I cannot fathom why it fails to occur to you."

That time, I really did almost snap. The only thing that stopped me was a frigid, carrying voice. "Shut your trap." It sounded like black ice.

Henry rose and stepped forward so fast his coat billowed out behind him. "I will not suffer this insult to my family."

“Y-young master, I—”

“Do you still not understand, man? Your right to speak is at my sole discretion. Know your *place*, Laurent.”

The second time he said the man’s name, his ice spell seemed to freeze Laurent solid. As if pushed down by some unknown force, Laurent’s knees hit the carpet. Out of all of us, he seemed to be the most surprised to find himself kneeling.

Henry didn’t have to do anything but stand there. There was an aura around him that I recognized. It was like Richard’s beauty—a kind of power impossible to defend oneself from, the brilliance of a rare gemstone. Being blasted by this head-on was like taking a dazzling Richard smile at point-blank range. It was impossible to resist.

I took a quick glance at Richard, who was still kneeling beside Jeffrey and gently rubbing his cousin’s back. “You did a horrid job of hiding it,” Richard informed him.

“...Ricky, can I ask how much you know...?”

“Henry reached out to me yesterday just prior to your arrival. I was not privy to the full details, but I was informed that I might meet a dear friend of yours. I’ll be at the dinner. I wish you two the best of luck and much happiness.”

“Please, don’t rub it in...”

“The best of luck.”

“Yeah, I feel...real lucky...urp.”

Until now, I had never seen anyone clamping a hand over their mouth when congratulated on their relationship. Jeffrey looked like he was in real pain. He cried like a newborn baby, and it almost turned the waterworks on for me, too. *Sure is hard when you can dish it out but can’t take it,* I thought to myself.

If there was revenge for revenge, then revenge for the revenge for revenge, then revenge for the revenge for revenge for revenge, and on and on in an endless cycle of revenge—then what was the point? What action sparked what revenge, and how long would it take for all the hurts to cancel out and make zero? Did anyone know? I didn’t think so.

But that didn’t mean we couldn’t break the chain.

It was possible. Isn't that what Henry said when this all began?

"Laurent, I will have words with you later, but you are dismissed for the present. I trust you've said all you wanted to say."

"Yes, young master, except…"

"Oh, there's more?"

"Yes, and I fear you may not wish to hear it."

"It depends on what it is. Speak."

"Goodness gracious, is that so? Then I am afraid, young master, that I retract my answer. I have nothing else to say."

All Henry said by way of response was a curt "Indeed?" Then he paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was once again like black ice. "You know, I might have reconsidered punishing you had you said one thing, one trivial sentence's worth of regret for exploiting the loneliness of a young girl. However, evidently, you have nothing to say on this matter. I suggest you think hard on what you've done and the cruelty of your actions. Now, you are dismissed."

"Young master, you are as ever the picture of naïveté. But so be it. I shall be in your rooms on the first floor should you need me."

"You are dismissed."

To my ears, "You are dismissed" sounded like Laurent was fired. And that was exactly what it was. Laurent walked down the stairs without a word, his crown of white hair bobbing until it vanished out of sight. Now only the hotel, a sentinel that had stood for centuries, was left to observe us.

Just as I began to wonder, *Okay, so what next?* a door creaked open. The door to the grandest room in the hotel.

A pair of almond-shaped eyed peeked out. "That was one long conversation. You guys done yet? I just need to pop out and take a leak. Miss Octavia gets mad if I use her toilet."

"Our apologies for making such a fuss." Henry began to introduce himself, but he didn't get past "My name is" before Vince stepped out fully and beat him to the punch.

"Yes, I know who you are. Henry Claremont, right? I've seen photos before. The name's Vincent Lai. My occupation? Anything

you can dream of, baby. My hobby? Giving up organs."

"Ah, yes. I've heard much about you. I believe Richard and Jeffrey made your acquaintance in Hong Kong."

"...Huh. Looks like you've recovered way more than I heard."

"It's kind of you to say that."

Vince smiled, a smile that didn't reach his eyes, and opened the door wide with a sudden jerk. The two burly bodyguards were lounging around in the bedroom which seemed like a tacit acknowledgment that we were allowed in—at least as far as the bedroom. The door to the connecting room was still closed, and I could hear the faintest sounds of a video game behind it.

Vince stood in front of that closed door with his arms loosely folded across his chest. We weren't going to get through him so easily, apparently. But neither would Henry give up with a fight.

"Vincent, I'd like to have a word with her. Would you please let me in?"

"You mean, about Leandra's secret records? The ones Miss Octavia has that the Claremont butlers want, right? We could hear you, just FYI. Miss Octavia put in earplugs halfway through the conversation, so if you want to chat, I would recommend waiting. She's in the middle of her favorite game right now."

"Which?"

"Which what?"

"Which game is it?"

I hadn't expected Henry to ask that, and neither did Vince. He almost didn't answer at first before he eventually muttered some name I didn't catch in a European language. Henry nodded and smiled like he had heard of it. Having another person around with some knowledge of video games made Vince relax slightly.

"Surely it would be all right if I stepped in to say hello."

"...Knock yourself out. *You're* not the one she'll get mad at."

"Thank you."

"Is everyone in your family this Machiavellian?"

"Why, yes. I'm glad to see you have such a deep understanding of our family's culture."

Vince looked disgusted but opened the door for the so-called Machiavellian next generation of Claremonts. Octavia wore headphones and sat turned away from the door, so he shouted at her back, “Miss! The person who destroyed Richard’s engagement is here. He’s in surprisingly good shape, so he says you can do your worst.”

At this point, none of us had the mental energy to argue he’d said no such thing. Jeffrey was still down for the count, Richard was too busy taking care of him, and I kept landing on “Skip a turn.” Henry was the only one who could turn his back and take the rain of blows for us, but he had just withstood a concentrated assault and launched a major attack of his own. Even if he hadn’t still been in recovery, having him as our sole fighter probably wasn’t a wise move.

Octavia spared us a glance but didn’t move from her swivel chair. Henry nodded back in greeting. Afterward, Vince stepped forward to block the doorway and leave the rest of us standing outside. It made sense to me—any teen girl would have been frightened by this many grown men in her room.

“Hello. My name is Henry.”

“...It’s you.”

“Yes.”

“By all rights, I should have a lot to say to you...but I seem to forget it all whenever I get too mad.”

“May I stay here until it returns to you?”

“You’re a disagreeable sort, aren’t you?”

“So I am told.”

Their conversation was audible through the open door. How many rounds was Henry going to go with her? I was only listening, and I already felt exhausted by this anxiety-inducing conversation.

Octavia continued to play. At first, I thought it was the same high-graphics shooter game from earlier, but I soon realized that this game seemed much older—probably several generations older—because of its chiptune sounds and pixel graphics. Enemies shot lasers at Octavia’s cursor from all sides of the screen. This was

followed by a wave of hurdles, which Octavia tried and failed to leap over. There were just too many enemies on screen.

She tried the battle again and again. She died again and again.

Henry watched this cycle for several minutes before finally commenting quietly, “I take it you enjoy video games.”

“I don’t have any particularly strong feelings about them. They’re simply the only outlet available to me.”

“Richard says you used to enjoy learning.”

“Keep my tutor’s name out of your mouth. You may be his cousin, but if not for you, Mr. Richard and Ms. Deborah would have been happy together.”

That sounded the gong for the next round of this boxing match. I doubted this was what Vince meant by Octavia doing her worst, but it made no difference. Verbally or physically, this bout had to end in blood.

Henry kept his calm. “Unfortunately, I fear the problem of the diamond and the inheritance would still have existed with or without me. I may be responsible for tearing apart the happy couple, but their relationship would eventually have ended, even without my interference.”

“Oh, enough of this nonsense. Are you trying to tell me it’s not your fault?”

“Not at all. There is no excuse for the suffering I inflicted upon them. What is done cannot be undone, and the turmoil I unleashed upon your life cannot be put back in its box. However, I’m afraid I’ve never been one to give up. I still believe there might be some way to make this up to you.”

“There isn’t. I will only be pleased when Mr. Richard and Ms. Deborah are happy. I’ve always intended to see them to that point and then depart from this world. Why did you have to get in the way of that? If it weren’t for you, I would be dead by now. I hate you. You’re a cruel man, Mr. Henry.”

My heart sank. When we spoke earlier, I was under the impression her suicidal ideation began after Richard and Deborah’s relationship blew up—that she wanted to see them have their happy ending and *then* die. But I had everything backward. Even the

order of events. She wanted to die, but not before she got to have just one good thing. Without it, death wasn't an option. The haze of depression hanging over her was much thicker and darker than I had realized.

Then she died again. The game didn't have anything that could be described as a player character—just a red heart icon bouncing on the bottom of the screen. She died. She died over and over again. I almost began to wonder if dying was the point of this game, because the screen was filled with enemies pouring in from every which direction. It looked impossible.

A few moments later, Henry spoke up again. "May I borrow it for a moment?"

"Borrow what?"

"Your controller."

"...Suit yourself."

All he would do was die immediately, she might have said. But she didn't. She was probably thinking it, but she didn't say it.

Yet...

Henry held his own far better than I had expected. Enemies fired laser beams from every angle. A forest of deadly obstacles raced toward him, and when he desperately dodged all of them, they were replaced by a series of hurdles the heart had to jump over. Octavia, Vince, and I—and probably Richard, come to think of it (Jeffrey was too distracted to watch the screen)—were convinced that Henry knew this game like the back of his hand. Me? I didn't even know the controls.

The boss feinted, and Henry's heart got hit. Game over. He sighed and handed the controller back to the wide-eyed Octavia.

"It's a challenging fight. But, should you keep trying, I know you will one day defeat it."

"...You're a gamer?"

"As you might have heard, I too spent a long period of time sequestered in my room. There was little else I *could* do during that time other than eat, sleep, and play video games."

“He was playing games the whole time?” the broken figure on the couch behind me mumbled. Jeffrey may have been Henry’s caretaker, but that didn’t mean he knew everything about Henry.

With Octavia’s permission, Henry fought the boss twice more and unsurprisingly lost both times. However, as he played, my eyes started to be able to track what was going on. For starters, this boss had the same attack patterns every time. If someone could memorize them perfectly and translate that into muscle memory, I thought, victory was possible. That was what gaining experience was all about.

But while Henry was in the middle of his next run, Octavia leaped up like something had frightened her and turned off the TV.

“Get out. I don’t want to talk to you. Get out, I said! Vince!”

“Yes, miss. You heard her, folks. We’re closing up shop for the day, so it’s time to leave.”

“This is not a shop, Vince!”

“It’s just an expression.”

I noticed the emphasis Vince put on “for the day.” Richard roused Jeffrey and helped him sit up, and Vince pushed all of us out of the room like a station worker shoving passengers onto a train. But there was nothing impersonal or businesslike about it, unlike when the burly bodyguards had kicked me out. Vince’s dark eyes glinted like obsidian, ordering us to come back later. Henry recognized that sign of trust for what it was and nodded.

And that was that. We were given food and our own rooms. I fell asleep in mine, nursing a mixture of complicated feelings. Everything would come down to tomorrow, I knew. *See you then.*

As odd as it was to say, the next few days turned into a video game camp.

We were the only guests in the whole hotel. We each “booked” a room—although there was no real booking to speak of, since Octavia had reserved the entire place—and woke up to breakfast waiting for us in the enormous dining room. Afterward, we enjoyed a walk through the sprawling garden and its riot of flowers. I asked

Vince if Octavia was doing okay and, if she didn't mind, if we could stop by her room and play a game with her.

We tried round after round in that horribly difficult shooter game. No matter how hard we tried, we always died. I'd been under the impression that shooters were games where *you* shot at the enemy, but apparently, games that required ducking and dodging enemy fire were given the same name.

Later in the day, when our eyes grew tired, we had an afternoon tea pick-me-up. We only went to bed long after the sun set and a fire was lit in the hotel fireplace. Then we started the whole thing over again the next day.

At the start, Henry was the only soldier in our bootcamp. Octavia didn't allow anyone else into her gaming room. However, the rest of us eventually got permission to come inside as Henry's cheerleaders, thanks to Vince's casual intercession on our behalf. By day three, Octavia allowed us to take turns at the boss battle in a rotation: first her, then Henry, then me, and finally Jeffrey. Vince didn't join in. Neither did Richard, but that was because Octavia refused to let him. She wouldn't even let him come into the room. Instead, that beautiful man watched over us like our guardian angel. He was always a step just outside the door watching over us all, silently.

The first breakthroughs came on day four. Over time, we all started to memorize the boss's attack patterns. When it came time for afternoon tea and the fourth different variety of pastry in as many days, I felt kind of pathetic. Henry had made incredible progress with the boss, leaving Jeffrey and me in the dust, at our truly shameful skill level. He got further in the fight with every attempt. He reminded me of a spring coiled as tight as possible. The more the spring was compressed, the greater the potential energy and the farther it eventually leaped.

On day five, Henry died just inches from the jaws of victory. After all, he, Jeffrey and I were from a different generation than Octavia. Even just watching other people play caused us eyestrain, and the constant button-mashing was a battle in and of itself. Henry said he needed a break, but he came back almost immediately.

“You okay?” I asked. I tried to pass him the controller, but I stopped short because that wasn’t Henry. The face right next to me was just too beautiful.

Richard had eyes only for the TV. “Might I take a quick turn myself?”

Octavia was too shocked for words. She shot Vince an imploring look, but he just shrugged. *He barged in,* the shrug seemed to say. *What was I supposed to do about it?* I knew Vince wasn’t *really* that irresponsible. So did Richard. And, if my suspicions were right, so did Octavia.

She didn’t say a word. She ignored Richard like he was just another piece of furniture, but she tightly balled up her fists in her lap.

Richard pressed *continue* and the chiptune music once again began to play. I lost track of how many times I had heard this song. It didn’t have lyrics, but I could hum the whole thing without the game—especially that first part. Hearing it at night would have caused me to have nightmares of it. With that as the backdrop, I witnessed a sight I had never seen before: Richard playing a video game.

Jump, land, jump. Slide, slide, and jump. *So you* were *paying close attention,* I thought. That answered that question. Of course, Richard wasn’t the kind of person who could sit on the sidelines and do nothing.

As he moved the heart with the controller, Richard said in even tones, “That amber becomes you.”

Jump. Jump. We had all played through this part countless times ourselves, but no person alive could play this and produce anything but strangled groans or clipped “Argh!”s. Yet Richard’s words kept coming with apparent ease.

“As you may be aware, *elektron* is an old Greek word for amber and the origin of the English word *electricity*. This association is due to amber’s property of acquiring a static charge from friction. A simple reason, wouldn’t you say? The ancient Greeks thus believed amber formed whenever lightning struck. Naturally, amber is not, strictly speaking, a mineral but actually hardened tree sap. Yet for

all that, it has continued to enliven imaginations, the soul, and—by extension—history. Just like any other gemstone."

Six blasters shot lasers at the eloquent jeweler, but none hit his heart. Not even one. I had watched this fight just as many times as he had, but I had no chance of perfectly dodging every attack just like he did. Richard must have been watching our hands, not just the screen.

And the words kept tumbling out. "I have never had such a fascination with video games before, but I can appreciate that this is another cultural artifact which would never have existed if not for electricity. That I can use it as a vessel through which to communicate with you—well, I only have elektron to thank."

Octavia turned away. From here on out, Richard was entering into an unknown phase of the fight. A forest of obstacles protruded from both sides of the screen. The screen split in half weirdly. Lasers feinted. Richard's HP dwindled in a matter of seconds. He broke our best record yet, but the game-over screen flashed once again.

"Well, it appears I still have farther to go," Richard muttered under his breath and made to put down the controller.

Before it touched the floor, someone spoke. A someone whose face and mouth I couldn't see from this angle.

"Aren't you mad?"

It was Octavia.

I heard the sorrow in her voice, as pained as if she were cutting herself with a knife. The moment the words were out of her mouth, she curled up into a ball like she regretted ever saying something so foolish.

Richard looked at her. When she refused to meet his eye, he turned back to the TV and murmured, "No. Not a bit."

"..."

"I watched the video. I was glad to see you alive."

"..."

"Jeff, what is taking you so long? It's your turn."

"Does it have to be? I'm no good at this. I just die the minute I start playing. Here, bet you five pounds that I die."

“Don’t let that stop you from giving it your best shot.”

Jeffrey nodded mutely, took the controller, and sat down next to Octavia. She stayed in her chair at least. Up until now, she’d left whenever it was Jeffrey’s turn, like an eighteenth-century aristocrat sweeping away when presented with someone from the lower class. She only returned when his turn was over. It was her quiet way of expressing how much his existence bothered her. But today, she didn’t make a point to let him know that.

Once the game began and reached the part we were sick of seeing and could have cleared with our hands tied behind our backs, Jeffrey said, “I watched your video, too. Like you said, I am a no-good criminal who deserves to die, but I have to say, I’m grateful you didn’t drag my boyfriend into it. And thanks for not telling my family my secret. I mean, they dragged me out of the closet kicking and screaming, so it’s not like it makes a big difference in the end… Oh shoot, I’m dead. Well, shucks. I wish I’d gotten farther. Well, this is Jeffrey Claremont, signing off.”

“You would be terrible at let’s-plays,” Vince said.

“At what?”

Vince looked disgusted. He dragged Jeffrey, who still wasn’t in the best shape, physically from his spot and motioned for me to go in. I, the relief pitcher, took the mound. Our star player was still waiting on the bench. *Come on, Henry,* I prayed internally.

But it wasn’t his turn. It was mine.

Octavia looked better today. She had some color in her cheeks, and Vince said she’d eaten and enjoyed the rolls and Sri Lankan croquettes served at lunch yesterday. That was rare, apparently. I was glad to hear she had an appetite. People were less eager to die if they had something tasty to eat.

“…Here we go.”

The game began. First, a series of laser beams. Then the obstacles. Then the jumps, a matter of timing and speed. My spirits started to lift when I pulled it off, even if this opening was only a few seconds long.

“Is it just me, or am I getting better at this?”

“It’s just you.”

“Ouch.”

The next attack arrived right on cue, as if Octavia had summoned it. This game’s retro style made me wonder what was up with that first game we played, the super high-def one. In this game, holding down the jump button adjusted the length of the leap, but beyond that, the player had little control over the heart. This game was like running away with all limbs bound.

Unintentionally, I started moving in the direction of my jumps while maintaining a death grip on the controller. Octavia asked in a low voice, “Why are you trying so hard? Isn’t it just a bother?”

“Nah, once you try it, it’s actually really fu—”

“I’m not talking about that.”

Not the game, that is. She was asking me why I was trying so hard to get through to her. She asked me, not any of the others—and especially not Richard—because I was closest with Vince, her one ally, while simultaneously being the biggest outsider in the group. Hooray for being Asian.

Unsure how to respond, I said the first thing that came to mind. “Because you…”

Just then, a laser sideswiped me. Yikes! That was just evil—the laser attack was the one spot where I thought would have been safe. It was a good reminder to not let my guard down. After all, once I died, that ended my chance to sit next to Octavia. I had to keep playing for as long as I could.

So, sobbing internally, I said, “Because you’re trying hard, too. Putting effort into things is meaningful all by itself. Like, there are mines nearby where lots of people work day in and day out. Maybe they won’t uncover a single gem the whole day, but they still keep at it. Day after day. To me, that’s incredible.”

“…Yes, but even if *you* succeed, there will be no reward. Unlike the miners, you won’t even have a pile of dirt to show for it.”

“Well, that’s true. But…”

But she still kept trying, didn’t she?

It took people to turn rocks into gemstones. Only when someone looked at a rock and decided it was a gem did it become one. I wanted to do that as well. I wanted to join Octavia and find

value in the things she loved and the struggles she fought so hard against.

Now that I thought about it, I remembered a snapshot of after-school life in elementary or junior high where I would play games and chat with my buddies, too. I used to go over to their houses and stay parked in front of the TV until it was time to say goodbye and go home for dinner.

That was where I died. It was a new personal best, but it also meant I couldn't tackle the Octavia problem any longer. I got up with a whine, and the person standing behind me moved forward to take my seat. Henry was back, evidently.

"I believe I've got the hang of it now."

He sat down in the spot I had just occupied with the look of a seasoned warrior returning to the battlefield. He faced the TV head on, controller in hand for one more go at it.

From that point on, I lost track of everything but the music. It always cut out partway through when anyone died, but this time it was a steady river. Jump. Jump. Slide. Dodge the laser beams and jump again. *So this is how the background music goes,* I thought, stunned by this new knowledge.

Henry's hands danced. His long fingers moved in precise snaps to dodge the obstacles. Jump. Slide. Jump. Dodge the unexpected feint with room to spare. Jump, jump, pause and combo jump, and then…

The end of the end.

Just like the start of the fight, the onscreen game character spoke—the one we had spent days trying to kill, the one who had tried to kill us for days. *Again?* he asked, addressing us with meta questions. He demanded to know why we wanted to kill him so badly. Well, there wasn't a particular reason. We wanted to play this game with Octavia, and that was it. We just wanted him to hurry up and die.

But Henry glanced at Octavia. "What should I do?"

"…Why ask me?"

"Should I keep going?"

"What's the point? It'll all end in death either way."

“I searched for a walkthrough to see what comes next… There is no returning from this, you know.”

“…I thought there was no cell service up here.”

“The hotel staff were kind enough to lend me a computer.”

Jeffrey choked. Here, in this colonial-style hotel built in the nineteenth century, a man in line for an earldom searched for walkthroughs on the internet. It felt like the first and second halves of that sentence came from two different worlds.

“What if I said I wanted to beat this challenge on my own?”

“That is certainly valid. But you know, you don’t have to go through with it. This doesn’t have to be the end.”

Henry looked up at Octavia from his seat on the carpet and smiled at her. Octavia’s eyes widened.

When the game character asked why we wanted to kill him so badly, I thought to myself, *Why does Octavia hate living so much?*

It wasn’t just that she was terrified of losing another loved one. That couldn’t be the only reason. During our game boot camp, I noticed that she *liked* having someone next to her, focused on a game. It didn’t make her smile, but she still watched them intently, delighting in this and despairing at that. Octavia, I realized, liked people.

Which was why she was as afraid of finding loved ones as she was of losing them.

But living that way was a kind of hell—the hell of wanting like anything to love someone but being too scared to do so. I could only imagine how painful it must have been to exist without anyone to love. If all she had left were the memories of losing something that dear… Were I in her shoes, I think I would have given up on life, too. It would have been too painful. Too heartbreaking.

Octavia sat in silence in front of the paused game. Henry, too, said nothing as he regarded the—honestly kinda endearing—character on screen. Finally, he spoke again.

“Something about this character reminds me of my brother. He’s mastered the art of playing the villain, he can befriend anyone, and he’ll follow you to the depths of hell to face off against you.”

There was a groan from the couch behind me. During camp, Jeffrey either curled up there like an object someone had set down or sprawled across the couch in exhaustion. Richard, meanwhile, called for room service and more than half-seriously threatened to make Jeffrey eat the sweets and drink the tea in that prone position. Watching them was fun; it was like a series of comedy vignettes. Henry seemed to enjoy the show, too, and I suspected Octavia didn't find it half bad, either.

In a tiny voice, she muttered, "I don't have anyone like that in my life. I don't want anyone like that, either."

"Why is that, might I ask? Why don't you want a person like that?"

"Haven't I said it enough? All the people who care for me die. Or bad things happen, and I can't stand it anymore."

"My father is dying, and I care for him very much. All our loved ones will die one day. Bad things happen to everyone, without exception. But good things happen, too."

Everyone, he said, would die someday.

I braced myself for the ensuing eruption. Either Octavia would scream that she didn't need to be told something so obvious, or...

Or she sat there, silent, her eyes glued to the TV. She didn't accept Henry's words as the truth, but she also didn't argue. Her face said she was somewhere halfway in the middle.

Henry waited a few moments before continuing in a soothing voice. "I understand the desire to be with someone because your time together is limited. But, Octavia, your parents did not make the wrong choice. If not for their sacrifice, you and I would not be able to be here and have this conversation."

"Why does this conversation matter so much?"

"That is an excellent question. You and I are living people. Because we are alive, there is always a chance that something—anything—can happen. Octavia, might I put forward a proposal...?"

The mood in the air changed. Neither Richard, Jeffrey, nor I knew what Henry was about to say, and of course Octavia had no clue. Yet, when I happened to glance over at Vince, I saw that he wasn't looking at Henry at all. He just kept his eyes fixed on Octavia.

“You do need some sort of guardian.”

“No, I don’t. If you’re concerned about my assets, I’ll be an adult in a very short time. Then it will be perfectly legal for me to manage my parents’ estate. I’ve already decided where the money will be donated once I’m gone.”

“No, I do not mean a guardian in the financial sense. I only think…wouldn’t it be nice to have an adult to watch out for you?”

Octavia glared at Henry with force. I thought she would snap at us to get out. The burly bodyguards would trundle in from the other room where they had been waiting in boredom for four days, and we would all be tossed out of the hotel. A real-life game over. If only this were a game, and we could press a button to start over from the beginning.

I prayed that wouldn’t happen, as Henry said, “If it were at all possible, I would be honored to fulfill that role for you.”

“What, as my guardian? What do you mean by that?”

“Octavia Manorland,” he said. “Would you do me the privilege of being my daughter?”

The surprise I felt in that moment would, I was sure, stick with me for life. His daughter? As in, his child? Father and daughter, like mother and son—like Hiromi and me? *But they aren’t even blood-related,* I thought, and then Mr. Nakata’s smiling face beamed down on me in my mind like the god of the sun. Right. I wasn’t related by blood to him, either, but he was still my father. Yeah. He really was. A father and son, a father and daughter—those relationships could be *built*, too, I thought.

Octavia’s eyes widened. Horrified, she whispered, “But you’ll die.”

“As I said before, everyone must die someday. I once tried to choose the timing of that death myself but have since returned from that brink. And now I know that it was because I was meant to meet you.”

“…What? What childish nonsense is that? You’re an adult, for heaven’s sake!”

“As you will be, too, soon. You’ll soon come to understand there is no strict delineation between children and adults. You will

also learn that there are many adults stuck halfway between childhood and adulthood, if only because they cannot accept the harsh realities of the world. I am one such adult, but I have made my peace with that. Were I anything else, I wouldn't be standing here today."

"Stop making weird jokes."

"I am not joking at all. If you would give me a chance and believe in me, I would fight for you with everything in my body and soul. I will shoot down and obliterate anyone or anything that tries to harm you, be it fate or no."

"Stop. I've heard enough."

"And Octavia, I promise you this."

"I said stop!"

"For you, I will not die. Nor will I come to any harm. Nor will I suffer any misfortune."

"Stop it! I can't take it anymore!"

Octavia surged out of her chair and sprinted toward the wall. She crouched in the corner, holding her head in her hands, demanding we get out of her sight. Through it all, the TV remained on pause. She screamed from her hunched-over position, "Get out, all of you. Vince. Vince! What are you doing? Vince!"

"I'm still here, miss. All right, folks, you heard her. Pack it up."

We were equally dumbstruck as we were shooed out the door. Only Henry moved with any sort of purpose, marching out the door with the help of his cane.

Was all that some kind of dream? No, it was definitely real.

Once dumped in the hallway, the three of us—Jeffrey, Richard, and me—rounded on Henry. Well, Jeffrey was still reeling, so only Richard and I packed any heat.

"...Henry, what on Earth was that?"

"I apologize for suggesting it without telling you first."

"Well, I—"

"I did mean it, though."

And, he added, it wasn't like any of them had children yet.

A slight crease formed in Richard's brow, but Henry's wrinkles vanished when he smiled. That was when we all realized Henry actually did mean it.

"I'm getting up in years and do not have a partner. It would be quite difficult—nigh on impossible—for me to raise a teenage girl, so I think I shall arrange for her to be left in the care of our mother. She would be our mother's adopted daughter, first and foremost, which is to say, our sister. However, I would still like to treat her as a daughter. Should I ever marry, I would find a way to make her my daughter legally as well."

Richard's face hardened. This was the real Richard, the serious Richard. But this was the real and serious Henry, too, I thought. He had to be serious if he'd put so much thought into the plan. It was theoretically possible, provided there were no unexpected hiccups. But was it compassionate? That, I didn't know. And what was Octavia to Henry anyway?

Henry's broad grin occupied the silence that Richard and I left.

"I've heard there exists a Japanese folktale called Kaguya-hime. In this story, a childless couple receive word that a lovely young princess will be born from a stalk of bamboo, and she will become their daughter. I agree that my lack of a wife could be cause for concern, yes, but I doubt it will be much of an obstacle to adopting Octavia considering the financial advantages I offer her. And if my Kaguya-hime has a few troubles of her own…well, doesn't that just make the experience all the more interesting?"

Richard and I stared at him in stunned silence.

"I suppose what I'm trying to say is that personal relationships are never easy."

Yeah. I agreed. I remembered feeling uncomfortable and uneasy when a man named Mr. Nakata joined our household. But Octavia was seventeen, not just a little kid, and Henry was a bachelor. I thought they would run into more issues than I could even conceive of.

However, Henry smiled with a uniformly peaceful smile. It was gentle, tender, and slightly terrifying in its strength. It was a magical smile.

“I am sure you understand. I debated making the offer the whole way here, and after much thought, decided to do so. The choice to accept or refuse is, of course, hers. Adoption is not something a child should be forced into.”

“…Yes, I would agree.”

“Indeed. However,” Henry added, his voice quieting, “if she does accept my proposal, I believe we will make for an interesting family in our own sort of way. Such is my hope, and I will do everything in my power to make it happen. Of course, I cannot claim that this move is entirely uncalculated. Laurent is right, to some degree. I am a weak man who fails to take responsibility for the things he has wrought, and this is how I shall remain until the day I die. But perhaps I can help Octavia, and that may very well be my greatest contribution to the world. All that is left is to see if she feels the same way.”

Henry smiled again to announce the end of his speech. For someone in his forties, the wrinkles crisscrossing his smiling face made him look like a wizened old man. Yet his eyes were as clear and bright as a boy younger than me. There was something deep and unfathomable about those eyes. Those were the eyes of someone who had come to grips with enormous pain and suffering. Maybe it was that pain which caused a discrepancy between his real age and his appearance. Maybe it was the same for Octavia and the exhaustion in her eyes.

“Now, what say we have a spot of tea? Our poor eyes could do with a break.”

Henry walked over to Jeffrey, gently maneuvered himself into his personal space, and walked with him down the stairs to the lounge on the first floor. After a moment’s hesitation, Richard and I started to follow. Considering that there were surveillance cameras in the hallways, we thought it was safe to leave Octavia alone. We also didn’t want to bother her. She probably wanted to be left alone by anyone but Vince.

“Richard?”

“Yes?”

“So…”

I wanted to ask what he thought of Henry's offer, but I didn't. Richard knew what I meant, anyway. In some sense, Henry was advising Octavia to surrender. To deliver herself right into enemy hands. To lower her drawbridge. How would Richard take that, when it was a member of his family suggesting it? Was there anything I could have done to help? Take Octavia and run, maybe? That was an extreme suggestion, but if Richard wanted it…

He didn't say anything at first. He just shook his head. "It is not for us to decide."

"Oh."

"Come, Seigi."

As I walked down the stairs, I took one final glance over my shoulder at the closed door. I couldn't help but feel concern for the last two people inside. No matter what Octavia decided, I hoped it would be the right choice for both of them. To put it in Richard's terms, choosing to walk in the light.

Then, with that wish and the sight of the closed door cemented in my mind, I turned away to follow Richard.

With the TV off, silence filled the room. The girl was the first of the two remaining occupants to speak.

"Vince?"

"Yes?"

"…Why have you stayed with me?"

"You're asking me this now?"

"It can't just be for the money, as I already paid what you wanted. Lord only knows what you might have used it on, but it was the full sum you said you needed. You could have left me, and yet you didn't."

Vince's eyes narrowed.

"Why?" she asked. "Why didn't you?"

"You mean why didn't I flee like a rat from a sinking ship?"

"You have some nerve to call me a sinking ship. But I can't say you're wrong."

Silence filled the room once more and Octavia, no longer able to take it, turned the TV back on. She frowned at the game's pause screen and hunted for the remote, but it refused to be found. Before she could pitch a temper tantrum, Vince changed the channel manually on the TV itself and brought up a Sinhalese weather channel.

Octavia quit grumbling and pursed her lips. "Do you understand what they're saying?"

"Not a word."

"Mr. Richard would."

"Well, I'm not Richard. Neither are you, miss."

"What is with you and that Japanese word you keep calling me?"

"It's like the English *my lady*, but a little less formal."

"No, you've said that before. I'm asking why you insist on calling me that. I thought I told you I'm fine with just Octavia."

"So you did, but I thought you'd be annoyed if I tried. Call it the intuition of a not very Hong Kong-y Hong Konger."

"That's almost odder than British intuition."

"Well, would you rather I call you Octavia?"

"...No. Something about that irks me."

"See? What did I tell you?"

"You're just like the others. You never answer my questions."

At that, Vince's employer fell silent. He took that as his cue to do likewise. However, no matter how long he waited for her to speak, the only sound in the room was the drone of the newscaster's voice. When it transitioned into a segment for the Buddhist sermon of the day, she switched off the TV.

This time, Vince broke the silence first. "'Others'? Who are these others who never answer your questions?"

The ensuing silence was so painful, it hurt Vince's ears.

"...My father and mother." Octavia set her jaw. "I've asked them hundreds and thousands of times why they left me, and they've never answered once. I see them in my dreams, but they don't say

anything to me. Not a word. I think…I think maybe they hate me. Oh, I'm just being stupid. They're dead! They can't think or feel anything."

"No parents would come back from the dead just to hate their daughter."

"How do you know? It's possible."

"I'm pretty sure you can't prove people can come back from the dead."

"Well, aren't you the sass master today?"

"I just thought I'd try to cheer you up."

"Oh? Why don't you jump up and down? Give me a few 'yippee's while you're at it."

"Yippee. Boing boing."

"Stop that."

"Miss, you are insufferable."

"Not half as much as you! Ugh! If you want to horse around, do it somewhere else. You're dismissed."

Vince stopped jumping with a shrug, but there his willingness to follow Octavia's orders ended. When he refused to go, she reddened. Her hands clenched around fistfuls of dress.

"You're dismissed, I said."

"Are you thirsty? Would you like anything to drink?"

"No!"

With another exasperated "Ugh!" Octavia marched over to the wall, slammed her forehead against the wallpaper, and sank to the ground. Vince didn't move and simply watched her outburst.

"What *is* it with you? Why haven't you left me? I already gave you the money, and you even said whatever's going on with your wife is over. But you're still here. With all the money I keep paying you, you could have left and bought your own house already!"

"I'm terrible with money. I haven't saved any of it."

"You're lying. You never waste money, and you don't have the time to blow through cash even if you wanted to. Why haven't you left me? It doesn't make any sense. Why me? I don't deserve it.

Everything's been taken care of! So why? Why?! Do you have some perverse interest in watching the disaster that is my life? You're laughing at me, is that it?!"

"No. Not at all."

Octavia whipped away from the wall and screamed in Vince's face. "Then what?!"

As ever, he simply watched her. He didn't break eye contact as with slow, shallow steps, he closed the distance between them and knelt before the girl who was his employer.

"...What?" she asked again, this time in a broken whisper.

"You'd laugh if I told you."

"Quit beating around the bush and say it. I am your boss!"

"Don't you know it hurts for your boss to laugh at you?"

"I won't laugh, then. There! Happy?"

"Happy."

"Well," he began, before pausing to fix his hair. Then, still on one knee, he said, "I know this is cringey as hell, but I think in my own way, I wanted to be a hero, too."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Someone who helps those in need. Someone who doesn't give up after setbacks. I'm not into the whole running around in tights like a superhero thing. Mr. Nakata, though? Maybe. He'd happily do it if his boss told him to. He's kind of scary that way."

"..."

As Octavia stared at him aghast, Vince resettled into a cross-legged position on the carpet.

"What I'm trying to say is: We're partners, miss. Just two screwups who want to do whatever it takes to make up for mistakes. Not that it was your mistake, strictly speaking. I think you just have bad luck."

"...Do you mean, bad luck with Mr. Richard and Ms. Deborah's marriage?"

"Mm-hmm. On my end, my mistake was selling out Richard. That was something I *chose* to do, entirely of my own free will."

“That’s old news. You told me about it ages ago.”

“I did. But you know what, miss? Strangely enough, you never hated me for it. You never laughed at me or used it to exploit me. Why was that? I thought teenage girls loved Asian bad boys.”

“Stop kidding around. What do you mean, Asian bad boys? Don’t be racist.”

“What do you think, fellow washout? You and me—don’t we make quite a pair?”

“You dare—!”

Octavia’s head snapped up, but she flinched when she saw Vince only centimeters away. She refused to turn away and glared at him like an animal with its hackles raised.

“You looked like you were in real trouble when I first met you, and that’s why I thought you’d be perfect for the job. I found out about you from the emails Laurent gave me out of that horrible Jeffrey man’s inbox, but you weren’t my only candidate. Far from it, really. To be honest, I ended up reaching out to you because I could tell you were in serious trouble. I knew no one would help me with my plan unless they needed lots of money, and fast. So that’s why I hired you. I let my money do the talking, so to speak. Poor, poor you. You’ve wasted so much of your life on me, and for what?”

“It’s okay, miss. You can just say you’ve kept me on because of all the trust we’ve built up over our time together.”

“Oh, shut up! Go away! I don’t even want to look at you!”

“Miss.”

“Enough, I said. Begone!”

“Miss.”

“Begone! Get out of my face. You’re bothering me.”

“Here’s a tissue, miss.”

“Stop.”

Vince presented the box of tissues to the girl, who was hugging her legs to her body, face buried in her knees, but she refused to look up. He waited for several seconds, tissue box still in hand, before taking a seat next to her while she shook with sobs.

“It’s okay, miss. Don’t worry about me.”

"...If you stay with me, you'll *die*. I don't want to see anyone else die! I can't take it anymore! You have people you love, don't you? Leave me and go home. Take your money and go be happy. I'll be fine without you."

"You can't really be saying, 'You'll be miserable if you stay with me.' Even the characters in otome games aren't that cheesy anymore."

"I'm an FPS player. VNs are outside my area of expertise."

"Wow, your eyes are as red as a rabbit's."

"I'll bite you, you know."

"Here, have a tissue."

Octavia took the tissue box and blew her nose with a loud honk. Before she could bury her face in her knees once more, she stole a glance at the man next to her and looked down in dejection.

Vince likewise peeked at her out of the corner of his eye and commented, apropos of nothing, "You should try VNs sometime. Marian can't get enough of them. ...No? Well, I'm sure you'll branch out into other genres someday. Until then, I'll just have to be patient."

"I hate that word. *Patient*. Just give it a rest. If you want to pity me so badly, put on your tights and fly out the window, Superman."

"I already told you I'm not into that sort of heroics. Plus, my priorities have—I guess you could say 'shifted' since I started looking for work."

"I've never worked a day in my life, so I don't know what you mean. Explain."

"Uh, how to put it..."

Octavia handed Vince a ball of her used tissues, and he threw it toward the trash. It sailed through the air in a clean arc before landing in the silver wastebasket.

"I suppose it comes down to how you interpret being a hero. Helping justice, you might say."

"..."

"When I first started working for you, I admit I thought your plan would benefit me in a big way. If you made Richard lonely and

suffering, then I could swoop in and help, right? But, to be honest, I don't feel that way anymore. Pretty sure you already knew that, huh?"

"...I just don't understand why Ms. Deborah said she didn't want the money."

Silent, Vince recalled the financial support plan that had preceded Octavia's revenge operation. At Octavia's request, he visited the freshly divorced Deborah Shahin and offered any money she might need to remarry. Her answer had not been favorable: *I have no need for your money.* The response was perfectly businesslike. Not cold. Not warm. Just businesslike.

Octavia stared down at her clenched fists in her lap. "Was it because my money would have brought her unhappiness? It was, wasn't it?"

"If I've said it once, I've said it a million times. There's no way, miss. That wasn't the problem at all."

"Then what was?"

"You already know what it was. She didn't want to marry Richard anymore. She couldn't take the money if it came with the condition to marry one specific person. That's like one country meddling with another country's domestic affairs. No one can lie to their own heart, miss."

"...Was it all my fault, then?"

"No, miss. Sometimes, things just happen because life happens. It's not anyone's fault that things turn out the way they do."

"..."

"If anything, it's for the best she turned you down. I didn't talk with her that much, but I think she was trying to treat you like an adult, miss. Isn't that nice? Yippee. Boing boing."

"That joke stopped being funny ages ago. Enough."

"You're the queen of put-downs, miss. Even crying can't stop you."

Octavia didn't pay Vince a response for that. She only let the tears course down her cheeks. They looked like crystal quartz to

Vince's eye.

He gave her a thin smile. "You look more like yourself when you cry than when you play the coolheaded villain. Well…that's not just you, I guess."

"…I don't understand you. What do you want from me?"

"Right now? Nothing big. Just… Ugh, this is cringey again… In its own way, sticking with someone having a hard time—sticking with someone who knows they're acting stupid—that's pretty heroic, too."

"…Is it now?"

"Yeah. It is."

"So you're only with me because you feel obligated?"

"Nah. I just want to."

In response to her ever-present sniffling, Vince handed her another tissue. He waited for her to dab her eyes, blow her nose, and look more or less calm before he added in a low undertone, "But you know…"

"Yes?"

"I'm starting to think about my family again. I mean it. My wife, see, she's all alone. Marian's more independent than me, so I'm sure she's fine. But still."

"…You're leaving?" Octavia's voice trembled.

Vince shook his head. "Nah. You're not getting rid of me until you tell me you're sick of me and really, really, *really* mean it."

"…"

"Why? It's simple. Because I want to, like I said."

She listened quietly and attentively as he continued, "You see, the whole reason I have a family… I mean, the whole reason I was able to save my wife was you, miss. I can't thank you enough for that. You gave me my happy ending. No matter how this all plays out, I already have the best happy ending I could have asked for all because of you. Thank you. I'm very glad to have become one of your loved ones."

"…"

“By the way, if you think this is my way of telling you to go kill yourself, the shock will make me jump out the window yelling, ‘Yippee!’ *With* a straight face.”

“Oh, shut up. I know what you mean.”

“Good.”

Octavia cried silent tears into her lap. She did not take any more tissues. She merely stared at the carpet, occasionally using her blue dress sleeve to mop up some of the fat drops falling from her streaming eyes.

Vince, too, remained silent at her side.

When the worst of the crying subsided, Octavia mumbled, “Vince?”

“Yeah?”

“…Thank you. I love you.”

“Ooh, this is awkward. See, I’m married—”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

Vince chuckled, then slowly, slowly extended a hand and patted Octavia on top of her carefully coiffed hair.

Later that evening, Vince interrupted the quiet dinner I was sharing with Richard and Jeffrey. He came bearing a smile and a message from Octavia. The hotel event was over, she said. She was going home to Switzerland. As for her response to Henry’s offer… that was still pending.

Pending didn’t mean no. *Pending* meant pending.

There was the slightest, tiniest hint of warmth in that answer, and to all of us, it felt like salvation. And I think maybe—no, I think definitely—that “us” included Vince.

The Subsequent Days

HATTON GARDEN, LONDON, was kind of like Tokyo's bustling Okachimachi. With jewelry stores everywhere I looked, the street felt more like a gemstone wholesale depot than a collection of retail stores. Historic jewelry shops dotted the whole pell-mell, chaotic district. Our destination was one such store.

"Ah, Earl Claremont. A pleasure."

"Thank you."

Earl. And the one who bore that title was none other than Henry.

The ninth Earl of Claremont drew his last breath the day after Henry returned to London. He made it back in time after all. Maybe he really hadn't been bluffing back when he said, "I know," to Laurent. By this time, Jeffrey and Richard were back in London as well, so Lord Godfrey passed away with all three of the men he'd raised from childhood standing at his bedside.

I attended the funeral and burial. I had expected them to be extravagant ceremonies, like the funeral of a major company president, but there were maybe twenty mourners, including me. We set up a pavilion in the cemetery and held a quiet service with no one but Lord Godfrey's closest friends and family. Whenever any salespeople or business associates wandered up, sticking out like sore thumbs, Jeffrey pasted on his fake smile and asked them to leave. It was kind of different, I thought, from how funerals went in Japan.

Afterward, when we returned to the Claremont mansion, I was put on duty greeting those who had come to offer their condolences. I received a baptism by fire of curious stares, pointing, and whispers of "It's him." Octavia hadn't been exaggerating that I was the focal point of high society rumors, but I prayed they would die off quick. Although maybe, I told myself, it wasn't something worth caring about.

No one told me what happened to the Claremont mansion's staff, but I hadn't seen any sign of Laurent since our return. On every visit to the mansion since, the butler was an industrious middle-aged woman.

This now marked my second trip to England since the death of the earl. This time, I was here because an item Henry had ordered was now complete. Not like I had made it myself or anything—I was just asked to be present as a witness when he picked it up.

It was his signet ring. In a custom that I couldn't have dreamed up had I tried, signet rings were apparently created every time an aristocrat inherited their title from their predecessor. It was part and parcel of inheriting the property.

A bald man with a rounded back emerged from the recesses of his semi-subterranean workshop. He wore gold glasses without rims and a band around the bottom of his shirt. He clasped a mourning suit-clad Henry's hand in a firm grip. If this were France, I thought, the two would have hugged one another. But this was England—London—and the jeweler knew Henry was an earl. I watched the two of them trade quiet respect for one another.

"Thank you, Master Beckett."

"It was my honor, my lord, but not my pleasure. Oh no, not at all. Never a pleasure to make the signet rings for two generations. Am I correct in understanding there won't be a third?"

This man—Beckett—was the master craftsman of this jewelry shop. He led us into a room that looked like a private study and had us wait there while he brought in a large, wooden box. He placed the box on a table in the center of the room and removed another velvet box from inside. It was a jewelry box.

Henry picked up this second box and opened it. "Oh my."

"The Claremont lion and your initials. You'll find the lotus flower engraved on the inside, just as you ordered. The inner stone is a white sapphire. Please, by all means, take a closer look."

At first glance, it looked like a plain gold-and-black ring. But when I looked longer, my eyes were drawn to the fine engravings. I pictured an ancient ring in a museum from the Middle Ages or Roman Empire. It was just like the garnet seal rings that Richard told me about during one of my adventures working at his Ginza shop part-time. Unlike the museum ring, though, this one was enormous, and the black stone had eye-catchingly minute engravings.

The ring was so large, it made me doubt my eyes. Had someone told me the table it sat on was child-sized, I would have believed them. But impossibly, it was a real golden ring. The jewel set into it was shaped like a rectangle with rounded corners and colored black with slight blotches of red.

It was a bloodstone. In gem language, bloodstones signified courage and wisdom, both of which were included in the Claremont family motto and represented in the engraved design: a large shield held aloft by a pair of lions. The shield was divided into quadrants. The upper right bore a unicorn, and the lower right, a rose-like flower. The upper left quadrant featured a bundle of arrows fanning out from a single point, and the last quadrant showed three towers. A ribbon ran underneath it all, bearing a motto in what was probably Latin: *Courage, wisdom, mercy.*

A stand of four golden legs, like a little table, supported the bloodstone. Before I could focus on anything else, I had to marvel at the size of this ring. It was probably ten centimeters around and maybe three wide. Not a piece of jewelry for anything but the most formal of ceremonies. I was afraid bumping into something with that ring on would break your finger.

The metal setting was a dull gold, like it had been sanded down to avoid an overly garish sheen. This aspect of the ring, just like all the others, fit Henry to a T. The metallic portion could be rolled in ink and stamped onto a letter or pressed into sealing wax. That was what made it a signet ring—a seal ring.

Every time the earldom changed hands, the new earl would have a signet ring made as proof of his title, so to speak. The ancestors of the modern British aristocracy arrived in England from Normandy by ship in the twelfth century. Signet rings and intaglio techniques were already a thing back then. Maybe this custom began all those years ago, although the rings themselves must have been less fancy.

Henry, Jeffrey, and Richard passed the ring around among themselves before I was lucky enough to get a turn with it. I turned it this way and that, examining the designs, before I happened to notice an engraving on the inside of the ring as well—a lotus flower drawn so thinly, it looked like it had been scratched into the gold

with a superfine needle. A stem extended from below the unfurled flower with a tiny white sapphire glittering sweetly at its base. It was magical. Because the design wrapped all the way around the circular band of the ring, the gleaming sapphire looked both like a seed and the sun that coaxed the flower to grow. It was probably a token of respect for Leah or a declaration to carry on the Claremont family legacy, both the good and the terrible. I was full of awe when I passed the ring back to Henry.

The newly made Earl of Claremont slipped the ring onto the pinky of his left hand. His finger looked miniature, almost like a toy, compared to the massive ring band. But for all its lopsided size, it settled onto his finger like it belonged there. It was, I thought, a wonderful ring. Mr. Beckett must have thought the same thing. His blue eyes shone as he nodded once, then twice.

Henry turned to the craftsman and said, pronouncing each word elegantly, “Thank you. I am eternally grateful.”

“Take good care of it now.”

“I shall. I won’t wear it often.”

“Come now, don’t say that. You should wear it whenever you go out, although I’m afraid you may find it a tad taxing.”

Beckett laughed, removed his glasses, and wiped the tears from his eyes. Henry exchanged a glance with Richard and Jeffrey, and all three stood up at once. Before I could even begin to wonder what they were doing, Henry moved to the emptiest part of the room. Jeffrey and Richard followed and kneeled at Henry’s feet.

“The earl is dead. Long live the earl.”

“The earl is dead. Long live the earl.”

First one, then the other murmured the phrase like it was a magic spell or a kind of ritual. Then they bowed and pressed a kiss to the ring on Henry’s little finger.

With that ceremony concluded, Jeffrey and Richard stood up and pulled Henry into a hug. Henry hugged back. They held each other for a long, long time.

I hung back and watched them from a few paces away. Maybe I was helping, taking on my share of their painful loss. Or maybe I was witnessing the birth of something new.

We were accosted by a wave of happy, jabbering voices as we left the shop. London was home to parks of all shapes and sizes, and Hatton Garden, for all its hustle and bustle, was no exception. The girl and the man were waiting for us in a park so small, it was little more than two benches and a hedge.

“Oh, are you done already? Pooh! What a shame. We were having such a *lovely* chat.”

“Hardly a shame, I should think. I’m rather shy around strangers.”

In her black mourning dress, Octavia looked like an antique doll. Her tightly bound hair had been let down to flow to her waist like a golden river. The golden brooch still shone at her throat, but it seemed brighter today. Maybe it was the clothes.

The man next to her was dressed in a style I had never seen before. It startled me when I was introduced to him earlier today. He wore a black dress shirt, a black necktie, and a jacket similar to a tailcoat. However, its tails were unusually long, making it look like he was wearing a dress. Under that, his black pants accentuated the thinness of his legs, and from the knees down, he wore a pair of black stiletto boots. To top it off, he had glittering orange lip gloss and eyebrows that tapered into thin points. Tan skin. Chiseled features. An ash-grey ponytail. Long false eyelashes.

Meet Joachim.

When Jeffrey met us at the airport, he looked like he wanted to die on the spot. “I’d like you to meet someone,” he began. I thought the man standing behind him was a model from work or something, but he turned out to be Joachim.

The owner of those glossy lips met my eye, smiled, and said, “Nice to meet you” in a low voice. He was beautiful.

During the car ride to Hatton Garden, Joachim and I made small talk. He said he knew Richard already; the aforementioned dinner must have happened and escaped my notice. He was part Northern European and part African American. He was a master of cooking Chinese food and a lover of fashion. He and Jeffrey first met in New York. To make a long story short, they swore a promise to

never be each other's happiness and carried on a sort of "contractual" partnership. I didn't really understand what that meant, but it seemed like Jeffrey and this person who could smile whenever he wanted—like magic—got along like a tricksy fox and a tanuki bewitching one another in Japanese folklore. They both seemed to be good at keeping their cards close to their chests. At least, closer than I could. I wore my heart on my sleeve.

However, everything had its limits, even a contractual relationship. Eventually, they broke the contract and ended up becoming partners in earnest, Joachim explained with a series of pretty hand gestures. He looked up at the sky in reverential gratitude and smiled. That smile—his real smile—had a childish element to it. Kind of like Jeffrey's.

Jeffrey suffered through our conversation with a "Death, take me now," look. He needled Joachim with constant reminders. "Chim, please. He doesn't need to know that. Chim, *please*." When he began to look sick, Joachim fussed over him with an exasperated smile. These casual yet efficient displays of affection were more parental than brotherly, which made me feel relieved. Jeffrey was the kind of person who wanted to take care of everybody else, and he would have burnt out without someone to take care of him back.

Before we reached the jewelers', we made a stop in an upscale hotel district to pick up Octavia and Henry. The jewelry shop was too small to fit all of us, and Octavia didn't like small underground rooms. Joachim suggested he and she could sit this one out, which Octavia didn't mind, so we left the two of them together—not without some concern—and went into the shop. Joachim must have been a more skilled conversationalist than me, because although Octavia was still wearing a disgruntled frown when we came out, she seemed to have warmed up to him.

Good, I thought, but just as I began to turn to leave, Octavia said, "Mr. Nakata, where do you think you're going all by yourself?"

"I sorta have a thing to get to… Don't worry. I told Richard. Sorry to duck out early, Joachim. I hope I get a chance to see you again."

"I would love that. Next time Jeffy gets on my nerves, I'll give you a jingle."

“Don’t. He never returns his calls.”

“Oh *my*.”

Joachim blew me a kiss from those glittery lips of his. It made me feel sort of warm and fuzzy inside, like I got a nice gift. The way he disregarded the concept of gender was fascinating. Doubly fascinating was his ability to maintain his fresh-off-the-runway look after a plane ride from New York to London. Honestly, I was impressed.

“You, too, Octavia,” I called. “See you later.”

Octavia jumped. She was ignoring me while I spoke with Joachim, but now, when she looked straight at me, it was clear something was bothering her. What was it?

“Octavia?”

“Mr. Nakata.”

She put a hand to her neck and pulled off the amber brooch with a snap. What if that broke the pin? Or put a hole in her clothes? I panicked, which made Octavia smile. There was something a little mocking in that smile, and also a little sad. It was the kind of face appropriate for a girl her age, one might have said.

“Here. This is for you.”

“You’re giving me your brooch?”

“If only. No, I’m asking you to take care of it for me for a time.”

To take care of it for her. Me. Her amber brooch.

I hesitated, unsure if I should, and in that silence, Octavia said, “My grandmother passed this down to my father, and he gave it to my mother as a gift. You know my grandmother’s story, don’t you? She and Leandra Claremont ruled high society from the shadows as guardians of the jewels. But that meant nothing to my father or me. This piece of amber is…well, it’s been my mother and father ever since the accident. I once promised myself that I would never give it away and would have it be destroyed with me when my time came to leave this Earth.”

She paused and shook her head. Joachim casually slipped away from me and reappeared at Octavia’s side with a supportive arm around her shoulder. She didn’t seem to mind.

“Mr. Nakata, do you know the story of Jūratė and Kastytis? It is a folktale from the regions surrounding the Baltic Sea.”

I shook my head no. As Richard would have vouched for, that was outside the scope of my knowledge set.

Octavia told me the tragic story in a calm, measured voice. Jūratė and Kastytis were a goddess and mortal man. Jūratė, the queen of an amber palace buried beneath the waves, fell in love with the handsome fisherman Kastytis. The two of them lived happily together under the sea until a god of the skies discovered the love between a human and an immortal. In his wrath, Kastytis was killed, the amber palace was destroyed, and Jūratė was imprisoned in the ruins of her castle. To this day, the story said, she mourned the death of her lover and wept down there on the ocean floor.

Amber tended to wash up on the shores of the Baltic Sea in the wake of storms. The stories claimed these gems were either Jūratė’s tears or fragments of the sundered palace.

“My mother told me that story many years ago. To me, this piece of amber is the last shimmer of a beautiful memory. It used to mean everything to me. It was the last thing I had left, like the last remaining shard of my broken palace. But now…because I’ve had it with me for so long, it just makes me terribly sad…”

“I understand.”

“So, I was thinking, I’d like to leave it with someone else for safekeeping. Someone I can trust.”

And that meant…me?

Uncertain, I suggested she leave it in a bank vault or something. Octavia shook her head with force. Her long golden locks swayed with the dignity of a sea queen.

“If you wouldn’t mind…would you keep my amber next to Mr. Richard’s white sapphire?”

“His sapphire? Oh, that’s—”

“Yes, I am aware. It is memories made crystal. Yours, Mr. - Richard’s, and all your friends and family. So if you could…well, add my piece of amber to that…”

She hesitated. “Then,” she said, “I don’t think I would be lonely anymore.”

Octavia gave the marmalade-colored gem a loving pat. The sap had congealed into thick lumps, almost like large, goopy teardrops. Or to Octavia, lumps of memories of her loved ones. She didn’t want her amber to be lonely, the same way a parent would feel about their child. So, I took the stone, touched it once myself with great care, and handed it right back to her.

“You’re always welcome to put your amber next to Richard’s sapphire. But I don’t think you should leave your brooch with me. If you can, give it to Henry for safekeeping. I’ll be going back to Sri Lanka besides, and maybe Tokyo after that. Then who knows? I could be anywhere, so I think you should keep the brooch with someone who will be staying closer to you. I’m pretty sure that someone has made all the preparations for you two to live together.”

“…If you must know, I was hoping you would pass the brooch along to the earl in a few years.”

“Oh, I see. So that was the plan!”

“Never mind. I retract my offer.”

“No, if you already have a plan, I’m happy to help.”

Octavia reddened, shook her head, and mumbled under her breath that, now that I had brought it up, there was one more thing…

One more what? She didn’t tell me.

She passed the amber brooch to Joachim, who fastened it around her neck once more. He reassured her that the pin wasn’t bent and that she hadn’t ripped a hole in her dress. Octavia, I realized, shared my bold streak. We both tended to rush headlong into danger, so maybe it was for the best that she had someone around to support her. Once again, I was so glad for the earl’s warmth and foresight.

“By the way, didn’t you have plans…?” Joachim prompted me.

“Oh! Sorry, gotta run!”

I waved goodbye to the two of them before hailing a taxi. I climbed into the black cab and told the driver my destination: “The

V&A.” The Victoria and Albert Museum, or the V&A for short. London had two museums noted for their jewelry, one being the Tower of London—of raven and prison fame—and the other being the V&A. However, I wasn’t going to look at stones. I was there to meet someone.

If the note Vince gave me before I left Nuwara Eliya was correct, this was the place.

Entry was free, and after walking through the gate, I ignored the stairs leading up to an exhibition hall on the second floor and went straight ahead toward a courtyard. It had a huge, if very shallow, pool where kids with their pants pulled up to their ankles played and splashed around. Their parents—tourists, from the looks of them—watched on. The opposite side of the courtyard led to a separate building with what was probably the world’s oldest museum café. It had a brick wall facade with classical columns.

I scanned the area around the pool and spotted an open seat on a three-person bench. A woman with a baby stroller occupied the right side, but the left half was free. Two kids in onesies—one cream, one sky blue—slept quietly in the stroller.

“Sorry, is this seat free?”

“Help yourself.”

I spoke to her in Japanese, and she responded right back in Japanese. *That’s her,* I thought, but I didn’t say anything as I sat down. I couldn’t. I knew who she was, but she didn’t know me.

When Vince and I had last seen each other, he had given me a note with an email address and a message saying someone was hoping to hear from me. That’s what had led me here.

“You must be Seigi,” she said.

The rhetorical “question” left me tongue-tied. She laughed at me in a sort of odd way. This woman had black eyebrows and well-defined red lips. She carried herself with dignity. A large scarf around her neck, a pair of jeans, and beige flats completed the look.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Deborah Shahin, a legal document translator from Berlin.”

“Berlin?...That’s a long way just to see me.”

“Oh, pish. Don’t you worry. I had other business in London, too.”

My thoughts raced. The woman in front of me didn’t look Japanese at all—she had the striking facial features of a European woman—but the Japanese from those red lips was better than mine. I recognized this sensation. It was very, very familiar. These days, it felt almost like an old friend.

Trying hard to keep my voice steady, I said, “I’m Seigi Nakata. I’m an apprentice jeweler who wants to work in government someday.”

“How’s that now?”

“Uh, well…”

It ended up being a long story.

I told her the entire series of events that began in the spring of my second year in college: the night I met a beautiful jeweler in Yoyogi Park, Kobe and my grandmother’s padparadscha sapphire, being offered a part-time job in a jewelry store in Ginza, Richard waiting for me for hours at Shimbashi Station, how I pursued Richard to England, the whole thing with the white sapphire, the telling-off Richard gave me and how I cried, the story of my bio dad and my real dad, how I went through jeweler boot camp in Kandy while studying for the civil service exam, meeting Vince on the cruise ship, the treasure hunt in Provence, my return to Japan, and a bit about the encounter with Octavia. Most of it ended up being about Richard.

Honestly, until I opened my mouth I hadn’t been sure what to say. Before this, I always thought I wasn’t able to put into words all things that had happened to me. But when I tried, to my own surprise, I was more than capable.

My story wasn’t a big deal. It had barely been four years between the day we met in my sophomore year of college and now. Yet in those four years, a ridiculous number of things happened to this person known as Seigi Nakata. I talked and talked and still didn’t run out of things to say.

Through it all, Deborah was a quiet, patient listener. When my long monologue dried up, she said only one thing with a perfectly

calm expression: “That’s good to hear.”

“Sorry, what?”

“That he’s doing well. He almost sounded like a stranger in those stories of yours—very dashing and handsome. The picture of energy and health.”

I didn’t know what to say. Finally, I dared to ask, “Was he…not handsome before?”

She giggled. “Do you care more about the flavor of your sake or the bottle it comes in?”

“Well, I mean…”

She had a point, but there was more to it than that. But I didn’t know how to explain it, and while I struggled to figure out how, she shook her head.

“Oh no, I’m not finding fault. Quite the reverse. Your argument is more valid than mine. Without an exterior, there can be no interior and vice versa. I suppose I’m simply the sort of person who cares only about what’s on the inside. Perhaps I stood out to him because I cared so little about his exterior.”

“…Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

By the time I realized what I had said, the words were already out.

What had gotten into me? She said she wanted to see me, so I was going *just* to see her. Nothing more. Didn’t I promise myself that? But my mouth moved with a mind of its own. *No*. *Stop,* my heart ordered. At the same time, with just as much force, my heart demanded, *Do it. Now’s your only chance.* My only chance to speak to her. This was it. We were little more than strangers and would never see each other again.

That’s why I had to say—

“Richard, he, uh… He likes you very, very much. If you, um, if you like him, too, I don’t think you should just…give up on him like that…?”

“Octavia said much the same.”

I felt my heart freeze over, soundlessly. Against the distant background noise of children squealing in the pool, I hung on to her every word.

"You must be curious about what led me to divorce my husband. To put it simply, it was a fight between my parents and my in-laws. My uncle had a drunken quarrel with my ex-husband, saying, 'If she hadn't married you, she would have been a British aristocrat right now.' The culture I grew up in is very patriarchal. After marriage, a woman is under the protection and authority of her husband, so this was unspeakably rude. It caused a rift to form between our families, and we ultimately were unable to make it work. Once I make up my mind, I'm always quick to act. Thus, I said my farewells, and that was it."

She spoke matter-of-factly, but oddly, there was nothing cold or clinical in her tone. As I listened to her, I wondered just what kind of person she was. A sense of guilt crept over me. I felt like I was judging something I had no right to criticize. Richard was good at picking up on facts about his customers and feigning ignorance. But me? I had no idea how to hide the things I felt.

"Oh, my family is so funny. They turned bright red at the notion of marrying Richard and refused to let me marry into such a rude family. But when they realized what a catch he had been, they couldn't get over the fact that I let him get away. Yes, they're a funny bunch indeed. Nonsensical, even. It wasn't their marriage! I eventually had enough of all that and moved far away. Perhaps I was influenced by a certain someone, although I must say, I would never have thought of moving to Hong Kong or Sri Lanka."

She giggled. *Oh, right,* I thought. She and Richard were on speaking terms. I couldn't imagine they had sent each other status updates during Richard's wild period in Sri Lanka, but she must have heard about it afterward. Somewhere, deep down inside, I realized these two were really, really good friends with each other. *Friends.* Was that what they were? Friends?

"...So, Deborah..."

"Yes?"

"You don't...feel like giving Richard a second chance?"

“I wouldn’t dismiss it out of hand, but neither do I see a reason to go out of my way for it.”

Right to the point and crystal clear. My better instincts told me to quit while I was ahead—we barely knew each other. I couldn’t pry. I knew the best thing to say was something like “Really now? Well, it was great meeting you.” I wanted to. I wanted to walk away. But…

I sent an apology to my future self, who was probably regretting this moment for all eternity, and forced myself to ask, “But why?”

“Why don’t I give him a second chance?”

“…If it’s not too rude to ask, then yes.”

“It’s difficult to explain. I suppose it’s, well, the timing of the thing.”

“The timing? Do you mean…?”

That, if enough time passed, there would be a possibility of making up?

Throwing embarrassment and my last chance to make a good impression to the wind, I asked her that very question. She gave me a thin smile and said, “No, no. I mean you, Seigi. The timing of you and Richard.”

The what?

I pointed at my own face in confusion. She gave a deep nod, an emphatic yes. It still didn’t make sense. What did she mean?

“At heart, Richard and I are both helpers. We love extending our help to those in need and working hard for those who would benefit from our talents. I suppose this might be true of everyone, in some way, but I’ve always felt more driven by altruism than self-actualization.”

“Okay…?”

“This means that, when people tell us they love us, we tend to fall for them.”

“Right, and…?”

“I am referring to you, Seigi.”

“What?!”

I was so loud, the kids in the stroller began to stir. Deborah smiled, stood up, spoke to the children by name, and picked up one in each arm. She must have really strong arms. I offered to help, so she smiled and passed me the little girl in the cream onesie. The baby pushed my face away with all her tiny power, and Deborah laughed and took her back. It was kind of demoralizing.

“I don’t mean in a romantic sense, necessarily. Put simply, it’s a matter of bonding. We only have so much time on this Earth, you are much younger than Richard or me, and I am sure there are many things you still wish to learn from Richard. He and I, by nature, want to give whatever is asked of us. When there is still so much to learn, how could I steal the teacher away from his pupil? If Richard and I share a higher calling, then it is to give everything we have of ourselves. I would never hurt a dear friend and steal him away when he is using every scrap of power to deliver his everything into your hands.”

I stared at her, stunned.

“Well, enough of that. Do you have any interest in learning German? I would make a better teacher of *Deutsch* than he would.”

I was speechless. She laughed in amusement and told me a story: One time, she and Richard had watched an old German movie together. Both Richard and Deborah were far more interested in the grammatical structures and the actors’ accents than the film itself. “Some date,” the man sitting at the café table next to them muttered, after the film. “You two were made for each other.”

This Richard, the one in Deborah’s memory, was younger than any Richard I had known. I wondered what he looked like back then. Divinely beautiful, no doubt. Just like now.

I frowned, and Deborah laughed again as she put her children back in the stroller. “No, don’t misunderstand. Whether you were here or not, my answer would have been the same. Luckily, because you are here, I know there’s a silver lining to my decision. Did you hear that? ‘Luckily.’ We’re lucky to have you, Seigi. ‘Luckily’ is such a beautiful phrase in Japanese.”

“…”

“Go out and learn as much as you can, Seigi. Just like Richard, I’m curious to see what kind of young man you grow up to be. I

work in communication instead of teaching, but I believe these two fields aren't so different at heart. Words are the tools that enable us to share what's in our hearts with one another. Without words, we would never be able to convey the contents of our souls to the world."

Conveying the contents of our souls. The way Deborah conveyed her soul to me now.

Something about that…well…

"It's kind of like an open question that we have to spend our whole lives solving."

"An open question, you say?"

"Yeah, or…a task—no, not that, either. Maybe, like, the one thing you can never give up trying."

That is, sharing your soul with someone. You could never give up trying to share your soul. It was like trying to understand what elevated a mere rock to a gemstone in someone's eye. It was that perpetual *trying*—that was what you could never give up.

Or something like that, I added at the end of my rambling. Deborah nodded.

"You're correct. We all might carry that open question with us through our whole lives. This world is too large and too lonesome for any of us to spend our lives alone."

The sound of the children playing in the water quieted, as parents and kids left the pool in small groups. The wind had picked up a chill, slowly but surely.

Deborah remained standing, making no move to sit back down on the bench. She watched me closely.

"I'm glad I was able to meet you. If you ever come to Berlin, let me know. I'd love to show you the sights."

"…Does that invitation extend to Richard?"

"Oh, Richard doesn't need a tour guide. He's perfectly capable of taking care of himself."

She flashed me a teasing grin. My stomach churned. This felt like the classic story of a woman picking on her ex. The years they spent as a couple, the circumstances that led to everything coming

crashing down, and the aftermath—they had all shaped my present relationship with Richard. Just like that one time I joked about sending a box of goodies to the drunkards in Yoyogi Park, I felt truly, truly grateful to have met Richard. And that was precisely what made this hurt so badly.

I stood up and bowed to Deborah. "Thank you."

"Why, whatever for?"

"...For letting me meet this man we know as Richard. And for not hating him after everything that's happened."

"You sound like you're speaking on his behalf."

"Sorry."

Deborah chuckled. "I've heard people say the Japanese 'sorry' means much the same as 'thank you.' Now I see what they mean. It was nothing, Seigi. We're fine. You, me, him. We're all fine."

"...Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. I know because, based on what you've told me, this person we know as Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian—not the Richard Claremont I once knew—is full of life and open smiles, with a generous heart. Best of all, he sounds like he's happy. So yes, I can say with full confidence that we are fine. Should it appear otherwise, that might have nothing to do with him. The problem, Seigi, might rest with you."

"...Well, maybe."

"Cheer up, Seigi. For Richard's sake. And, I suppose, for mine."

Then, with those parting words, she pushed the stroller out of the huge garden and vanished into the crowd. It was only then that I realized how short she was. For some reason, the whole time she was next to me, even when she was carrying her two children, she seemed larger than life.

Cheer up, huh? For her sake?

It sounded like lip service, but those were, I realized, words of grave importance. It was like what Catherine said to me in Provence: *Tell my boy he's beautiful forever.* That came so naturally to me it would have been a done deal even if she hadn't told me. Cheering up, though—that felt harder. Especially back in Nuwara

Eliya not long ago when I came close to making a very bad decision indeed.

I wandered from the garden into the rest of the museum. I was already here, and if I didn't pick up a gemstone fact or two, I knew I would struggle to answer Richard's inevitable question, "So, where did you go and what did you do?" I followed a sign reading *Jewelry* in English into the heart of the museum. A couple of excited girls dashed past me under the enormous chandelier in the entrance hall, yelling to each other, "The exhibit on rock bands is this way!" Boy, this museum sure had everything. A collection of antique porcelain, a reenactment of a nineteenth-century mansion, a broken electric guitar that a famous rockstar once smashed on stage, the British crown jewels… A little bit of everything. Kind of like life.

Being alive meant having one thing after another happen to you. It was impossible to understand—to grapple with, to digest, to drink deep and swallow—all of them. This was no water from a faucet. These were *things* happening, happening, happening one after the other, every one of them too big for me, all of them forming a muddy stream I was swept up in and borne away on. By the time I looked up, I was already being washed out to sea on this wave of *things* I couldn't possibly swallow in their entirety.

Maybe I was a little tired.

I stood at the entrance of the jewelry exhibit, still reeling. The room was dimly lit, and I caught a glimpse of security cameras. My body didn't feel as heavy as when I had visited the British Museum's jewelry exhibit, so I must not have been too exhausted.

An array of rings arranged in a multilayered spiral greeted my eyes. Rings, rings, rings. The centermost diamond ring drew my gaze as easily as if a tour guide had directed it there, and innumerable rings radiated out from that. They were arranged by color, not variety. Clear diamonds, colored diamonds, pale aquamarines, opals, moonstones, star sapphires, florites, tanzanites, blue sapphires, jades, peridots, emeralds, garnets, corals, carnelians, star rubies, padparadscha sapphires, spinels, red rubies… Oh my. Oh my God.

Rings from every era, of every size, were jumbled together. They were all so different, it was harder to find points of comparison. I was spellbound. I felt like I could hear someone saying to me, *Isn't this beautiful?*

Meanwhile, in real life, a group of little girls ran past my knees, squealing to each other about how pretty it was. They spoke in French, and I wondered if they were siblings. Two years ago, I wouldn't have known what they were saying.

Gemstones were beautiful.

I was grateful I still had a soul that could find the beauty in them. In the blinding brightness of confusion, of despair, of being really and truly at my wits' end—that's where I found the silhouetted figure of a kind man. And the loneliness deep within him.

Stones were beautiful. The sort of thing that made me appreciate just having them. Just them being there meant the world to me.

I walked through the rest of the dim, quiet exhibit. It was like a library of gemstones extending as far as the eye could see. A diamond tiara made up of finely detailed roses. A necklace featuring a ship made of horn-shaped baroque pearls and lapis lazuli, supposedly a good-luck charm for seafarers. A transformation bracelet made of rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. A necklace of enamel and moonstone designed by a figurehead of the art nouveau movement.

The jewelry pieces weren't just laid out in uniform rows. Some pieces were positioned at head height for the viewers to see their reflections in the glass case wearing startlingly beautiful jewelry. The further I explored, the more I came to appreciate that idea. Every piece was of unbelievable quality. Some were, naturally, gifted to the museum by the royal family or aristocrats as a token of goodwill, but literally everything else was the kind of item that would never have been caught dead in any of the jewelry shops around here. The proceeds from selling just one could have paid for a house to be built from scratch.

It amazed me to imagine how much effort went into each and every piece. It felt like a waste, but at the same time, some part of

me envied the people who put in all that effort. Beautiful things never die, as Saul once said. Putting your blood, sweat, and tears into something eternal was, in some sense, maybe the same thing as living forever—eternal life in one of the largest and most famous museums in the world.

The two little girls from earlier giggled together. “There’s more jewelry here! And here! And over there!”

In every jewel and piece of jewelry lived the souls of their miners, jewelers, goldsmiths, gem cutters, artisans, financiers, gifters, and giftees. I couldn’t see them. I didn’t have ESP, like most people. But that didn’t change the fact that gemstones were beautiful. Beautiful things existed exactly as they were, unchanging. Even when a person passed on. Even when a love ended. There they remained, those beautiful things.

After walking, walking, and walking some more, I found a place to collapse. I settled down on this backless bench and, before I realized what I was doing, nodded off like I had done countless times before on the Yamanote line. Yikes. This wasn’t Japan, so falling asleep in public was like asking to have your stuff stolen. Worse, it made trouble for the museum staff.

I told myself I had to get up, because I had to get up and go back. I stood up, staggered, and—stopped short when a person behind me caught me by the belt loop.

“Get your act together.”

That was Japanese. Impeccably pronounced Japanese. Spoken in a tender voice, as lissome as running water. But how?

“Richard? What are you doing here?”

Was this a dream? No, it was real. When I turned, there was Richard in the flesh on the opposite side of the bench. He nodded in greeting, if an exasperated greeting.

“You will fall if you stand up so suddenly. Sit.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

I brushed past my embarrassment and asked what happened to Henry and Jeffrey. Did everything go okay with the ring?

Richard smiled and shook his head. “I fear I have just received a complete and utter rejection, and I thought it advisable to seek

out comfort from a bosom companion."

My stomach twisted, but Richard still looked annoyed with me, so I tried my very best to hide how I felt. What was with me? Why was I so emotional?

"Were you listening to us…?"

"No. Deborah sent me a message. 'A kind fairy led me to the V&A to meet a one Mr. Seigi Nakata. I found him to be an exceptional person.'"

"…A kind fairy…"

"One I shall have to treat to *yum cha* as thanks, I am sure."

If Richard knew all that, then there was no point in hiding anything anymore. I took a deep breath. "Hey, so…Richard."

"Yes?"

"Um, you know…"

"What is it?"

"I…"

I felt like I was going to cry. It was complete and utter self-pity, and the rational part of my brain told me to cut it out. But the emotional part pleaded that I *wanted* to cry, so I thought I could allow myself a single tear. It trickled from my right eye down my cheek.

"I don't know if…I'm capable of doing right by you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I used to think…I could give anything a shot if it was for you. That's been my motto this whole time, and I want to keep trying hard for you. It's just…"

That was all just to make *me* happy. It was making it all about me, me, me.

So maybe…

"I wonder if maybe…I haven't been doing the right thing all along. All this 'I'm doing it for you' crap—that's all an excuse to hide the fact that it's for me. For what I want. I've just gotten really, really good at telling myself excuses. And if so…"

Then I could never live with myself.

Repairing things with Deborah wasn't the only way Richard could be happy. That line of thinking was too similar to Octavia's—using my desire to see a happy ending to justify forcing other people to fit my definition of happiness. No, that was cruelty.

All the same, another chance with Deborah was clearly *one* form his happiness could have taken.

What if I hadn't come to Richard's rescue in Yoyogi Park? What if Richard bore Japan a grudge and longed for home back in England? What if Jeffrey had taken pity on him, said, "Screw the diamond," and burned down the Claremont mansion like he once threatened? What if the future had other things in store for Richard—better things, things I couldn't even imagine? Could I dare wish that he would throw those all away, just so that he could be with me?

This was only theoretical, of course. There was no way to turn back the clock. But what if there was? Then what horrible fate had I wreaked upon him? Just by—just by being his friend? Having Richard as a friend made me so happy, I could have died and been just fine with that. But what tragedy had I unleashed upon Richard's life in return?

My sense of justice was, at the end of the day, self-serving.

I cracked a smile when I reached the end of my speech. I couldn't help it. This name—Seigi, "justice," like a hero dispensing justice—was a wish passed down to me by first my grandmother, then Hiromi. However, just as there were repercussions for any act of evil, there were consequences for any act of anything. I affected my loved ones, and that could be either good or bad. I never knew which beforehand. Either way, there was always a decision to be made. And choosing something was the same as *not* choosing everything else. Most people learned that life lesson in high school when choosing future career plans. Me, though, I only got the memo now. Now it sunk in harder than ever before, and there was no response to that but a smile.

"I don't want to say, 'I'm sorry,' because an apology isn't good enough. But I just...don't know what to do instead."

"Two things."

"Hm?"

I looked over my shoulder to be greeted with Richard's face and his hand holding up two fingers. A peace sign? No, of course not. If anything, he wore a frightening glare.

"There are two solutions to your current predicament, both of which are viable options at this present moment in time. One, I explain my opinion of you via words as is our habit. Or two, I express myself without words. Which would you prefer? The latter method is the more expedient of the two."

Richard retracted his fingers. His face was so close, our noses almost bumped. His eyes were blue—not an angry blue, simply the shade of blue they turned whenever he gave me stern advice.

"...If it's okay, I'd prefer the slower option. Your voice always makes me feel calm."

For a moment, Richard looked offended, like he doubted I really meant it, or like he was a child receiving a gift that was pulled away at the last second. Then he looked away, muttered, "It's probably for the best," under his breath, and assumed his usual jeweler's expression. *Whew.*

"Very well. Stand up."

"What?"

"You asked for the slower method, did you not? Go on. We shall take a tour of the exhibits."

Richard gestured for me to look around the room. A moment later, my breath caught in my throat. Here, at the—I guess this would have been called the heart of the museum?—the entrance had a symbol next to it indicating photography wasn't allowed, unlike every other room up to this point. Maybe it was for security. The jewelry here was so fabulous that any thief would have been tempted, regardless of what a bad idea it was.

A necklace set with a yellow diamond so large it pushed the boundaries of wearable. A jewelry set made of diamonds and pink opaline glass. A necklace of large peridots, each of which could have been handcrafted by a god. A pavé brooch of countless sapphires in the shape of a bouquet of calla lilies. A maharaja's necklace of cabochon rubies that looked like tasty gummy candies. An enormous amethyst talisman shaped like a snake's head.

Had I really tried to take a depression nap in the heart of this museum of wonders?

Shooing away the disgust I felt for myself, I focused on Richard lecturing me about the gems. My guide spoke in a hushed voice as we were in public, but his eloquence and knowledge were as worthy of admiration as they ever were. This piece, he explained—an orchid tiara and matching comb—were designed by a distinguished glass artisan and exhibited at the World's Fair. That orange stone was a fire opal, and the tiara frame was made from animal horn. This peridot choker held the story of marital strife between the English and Dutch royal families. That piece of jewelry once belonged to a maharaja and was made by a French jeweler who blended the beauty of Eastern and Western styles. With every story he told, I learned a little more.

Once we had made one round of the room, Richard asked how I felt.

I smiled wanly. "Thanks. Just by being here, I've fallen in love with gems harder than ever before."

"I am glad to hear it."

"You really like the jewelry in this room, don't you?"

"I do. I often used to visit this museum on occasional pleasure trips to London. It was always time well spent, as not every collection is on display at once."

Richard smiled mischievously, almost like a child. He must have started coming here when he was very young. Of course, he would have grown up surrounded by jewels, thanks to his grandmother's collection and the Claremont family gems, but that hadn't stopped this little boy from being awestruck by the ones on display. I found that touchingly adorable.

"After all the things you told me, I have to apologize, but…"

"Yes?"

"The whole time you were talking, I couldn't stop thinking about you."

The "Oh?" Richard said by way of response carried neither surprise nor offense. There was a level of tolerance to it that all but

said, “I assumed as much.” It made me choose to press my luck a little further.

“As far as I can tell, you’re the most beautiful person in the world. I can’t imagine that would ever change.”

“Ah.”

“You know, it’s funny lately.”

“Yes?”

“…Even when I close my eyes, I still find you beautiful.”

At this, Richard cocked his head in slight confusion. I knew perfectly well that I had said something strange. But I didn’t know how else to express it.

“Obviously, if I went blind, I would lose the ability to appraise gemstones, estimate carats, or even notice if a stone underwent a color change. But…I feel like I would still be able to see your beauty just as starkly as I can now. No, I *know* I would. It doesn’t make a difference if my eyes are open or closed. To me, you’re just as beautiful either way. You’re beautiful today, you’ll be beautiful tomorrow, and I know you’ll be beautiful the day after that.”

“Even in ten years, say? A hundred?”

“Yes. You would be. I know that for a fact.”

I nodded, and a light smile crossed Richard’s face. That might have been his way of reminding me we’d both be dead in a hundred years. But maybe, just maybe, something would survive like the jewelry in this exhibit. Whatever that something was, I knew it would be beautiful. The most beautiful thing I had ever known and ever would know. Maybe all that would vanish would be me, the beholder of the beauty.

“In that case, perhaps you have a different ‘eye’ than I do.”

“…An eye? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Yes, an eye,” Richard said. “I once said you are only able to compliment me because, in your eyes, you and I are two distinctly different creatures. Since then, I have been fortunate enough to watch you grow tremendously as a human being, both in the physical and the mental realm. If I may be frank, I had hoped this growth would result in fewer compliments from you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that. I’m really very sorry.”

“I’m not done yet.”

I sat up straight. “Yes, sir.”

It was very rare to hear Richard use contractions in such a dispassionate voice. I wondered if he had picked that up from Vince.

“You insist on calling me beautiful. Surely, I have begun telling myself as of late, it would be churlish of me to persist in perceiving this as idle flattery.”

“Um, I guess so…?”

“In short: To you, I *am* beautiful.”

His finger wagged gracefully as he pointed first at me, then at himself, like a wizard casting a spell. The beauty of it took my breath away. Richard smiled sweetly as if he had known it would and tilted his head again.

“If I may, perhaps this is your way of telling me that I am and always will be. Just as you are precious to me and always will be.”

Now that he said that, I realized he was right. To me, Richard was beautiful. To me, beauty was Richard. Because I knew he would still be beautiful to me even with my eyes closed, saying so was less an observation. It was just a description of what he inherently…

What he inherently—wait. *No, hold on.* Was it just me, or had Richard admitted something much more important? That I…that I was precious to him? Was that what he said?

“What…does that mean exactly?”

“Forgive me. As an Englishman, I am afraid I understand little of the intricate nuances of the Japanese language. Mr. Seigi Nakata, would you care to enlighten me what *precious* means?”

I—I mean—

Totoi was “precious” if directly translated into English. The Japanese dictionary sometimes included the English phrase “precious stones” next to the exemplary *totoi* stones—diamonds, sapphires, rubies, what have you. Same for semi-precious stones, aka half *totoi* stones. But enough about that. That had no bearing on what just happened.

Precious, well. It meant—fortunately for me—something very, very valuable. It told me everything I was wailing about earlier—if only Richard hadn't met me; maybe he could have met someone better; woulda-coulda-shoulda—hadn't been brushed off and ignored. Not one bit.

This beautiful jeweler snorted lightly and continued casting his magic spell on me. "And so once again, you fail to see anything but half of the equation. Consider the matter from my perspective. For every option you have robbed me of, I am guilty of depriving you of just the same. I have left a large part of myself in you over these past four years, influencing the way you live and think as an individual. And, even if you view your actions as the height of evil, I do not regret a single moment of it. I do not believe in the slightest that I erred in choosing to monopolize the resource known as Seigi Nakata. I am thrilled to have met you, to have spent time with you, to have developed a deep relationship with you, to have been introduced to your other loved ones. All of it is precious to me. If you ask me to pretend none of that ever happened, you force me to deliver this message: Take that claptrap and stick it up your arse. Your time with me is nothing but a treasure to me."

"…"

"Do you understand, Seigi? You are a part of me, and I—I am a part of you."

You are a part of me.

The words lodged deep inside my ears with their repetition. What was I doing right now? Sitting? Standing? Was I on Earth? Floating through outer space? Where was I? What was I? I—

Did this man just tell me I was a part of him? Part of the most beautiful living being in the world?

A tear spilled down my cheek. Richard wiped it away briskly, almost with exasperation, then set his jaw and continued, "Now, if you'll forgive me for being redundant… I evidently do not mind your compliments on my physical appearance. In fact, quite inexplicably, I find I no longer struggle to look at myself in the mirror. Perhaps I have your silly voice in the back of my head to blame. Isn't it odd? Prior to meeting you, I often looked in the mirror and tried to convince myself I wasn't beautiful at all."

“But that’s impossible. You can insist that the sun rises in the west, but that doesn’t make it true.”

“I agree. Thus, I would consider this a positive development. And,” Richard added, “I am grateful to have you in my life.”

Oh. I’m glad to hear that. You really have no idea how glad I am. I was so relieved, it even dried up my tears.

I didn’t know if I had made the right choice or not. Maybe that was all a matter of how I looked at it. But when I did struggle with that interpretation, Richard told me, “I’m glad you stepped into my life.” And that made me happy.

It made me happy to hear that I was precious. That I was a part of him. That he was happy enough to tell me that.

Because, inside and out, I felt the exact same way about him.

“…Thank you.”

“That was certainly a lengthy explanation, but I hope it was effective.”

“It was. It really, really was.”

“Excellent. Lecture over.”

Professor Richard beamed and suggested we keep moving along. When I joked back—asking why, since I didn’t exactly have any other appointments after this—he informed me that he was hungry. That one almost got a laugh out of me. Come to think of it, the museum did boast an excellent café—reputed to be the oldest and most beautiful in the world—that sold tea and cake. The very thing Richard craved whenever he felt worn out.

He guided me there, telling me I’d be shocked when I walked in and that I’d love it. *Wow,* I thought. *Richard really does love this museum.*

“Hey, Richard?”

“Yes?”

I asked him something that had been on my mind for a bit. Just to be sure, basically.

“What would you have done if I had chosen the shorter explanation?”

“Slapped you.”

“Figures.”

I’d had a feeling—his right hand had kept twitching. It would have been a real wallop of a slap, too. A *Come back to reality, Seigi* slap. Never mind the fact that we had been in a jewelry exhibit. I couldn’t bear to imagine what would have happened if someone had thought it was a fight and blew the alarms on us. Really, I had made the only possible choice.

Thank goodness I didn’t give Richard a negative memory to associate with this place he loves so much, I thought to myself with a sigh of relief. However, I had another worry: I knew I really shouldn’t make any negative associations of this place for Richard. And yet, what I was just about to do…

Oh well! All I had to do was believe in that one word: precious. This was my last chance, and if I let it slip away now, I knew I would never get this opportunity again.

“Hey, Richard, do you have a moment?”

We stopped in the spot where the heart of the museum ended and the next exhibit began. The beautiful man turned to me. That alone dazzled me.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Could you give me your hand?”

“Whatever is this about?”

“Nothing. Come on, please.”

“At least tell me what I am giving you a hand with.”

“Not *a* hand, *your* hand!”

He was being too slow, so I grabbed his hand—not by the wrist, by the hand itself—and I kneeled down. And I kissed him.

…Right on the spot where Henry wore his signet ring, the little finger of the right hand.

“Long live the jeweler. Please. Do live a long life. And a happy one, too. I’d like that for you.”

A group of people came around the corner and squealed when they saw us. *Oops. I’m so sorry.* Of course they squealed at a grown man down on one knee—I was blocking the path! They couldn’t get around me!

Richard might have let me off if it had only been a kiss, but holding his hand a little too long was just rude. I stood up, laughing to hide my embarrassment, and brushed the dirt off my knees. Richard looked almost like he was sulking.

"Sorry, sorry. I couldn't resist after what happened earlier."

"...That almost sounded like a farewell."

"No, I really meant it. Like a 'Thanks for everything, and I hope you don't mind if I keep bothering you.'"

"Yes, I am perfectly aware."

"Man, you know what? It would make me so happy if we could be together forever."

"Why, are you planning on leaving? Ridiculous. I'd chase after you."

"If any one of us is doing the chasing, it's me. Seigi Nakata, the Narita-to-London globe-trotter, ain't afraid of nothin'."

And then—

Then I forgot everything I was about to say. Completely. I just couldn't speak at all.

Richard had s-s-something in his mouth. Something. I couldn't even register that it was. My. Finger. The spot at the base of my little finger, trapped between a bivalve of flesh.

A few seconds passed before I whimpered. Richard flashed me a look of triumph.

"Now, shall we be off?"

"...Y...Yes."

"I am quite looking forward to this cake. I hear there is a rainbow cake available for a limited time only."

"Rainbow, huh? That's, uh, nice. Do they—um, do they have royal milk tea?"

"I am afraid not. It shall have to be water and cake."

"Water, huh? That's...nice."

"Yes, it is."

"The source of life."

"Indeed."

“And, uh, tasty.”

“I would agree.”

We walked as stiffly as a pair of robots. I wanted to ask what the hell that was all about, but I knew Richard just meant it as payback. I didn’t need to ask. But I was curious about one thing: Why me? No, I didn’t need to wonder that, either. It must have been his way of wishing me a long, happy life, too. Yeah, it was that kind of thing. That kind of kiss. Had I been a dog, I would have pelted out into the yard and rolled all over the place, but unfortunately, I was neither good boy Taro nor good boy Jiro. I was good boy Seigi, so no rolling for me.

I thought about Jiro in an effort to escape from reality. Jiro… I hoped he was doing okay at the neighbor’s. Was he eating enough? Sleeping well? Howling from loneliness? And just what the hell was that kiss about? *Oh, shoot.* So much for the escape from reality.

We walked through this endlessly labyrinthine and beautiful museum in an uncomfortable silence before we eventually found the stairs leading outside. Just then, I heard a ringtone. It was Richard’s. I figured it was Jeffrey or Henry calling to ask where we had vanished to. I owed them an apology, I thought, just as Richard’s face morphed into one of surprise.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Maya.”

Huh? Maya? As in, like, that Maya? The memory itself felt like a blast from the past. Why on Earth would she have been calling Richard now?

Well, for whatever reason she had to be calling, I heard that familiar breezy and teasing voice sing out a “Hello there!” It was faint, but I could still hear. “How are you, darling? Remember me? It’s Maya Hamada, the brilliant jewelry designer from Kyoto.”

“How could I ever forget you, Maya? Now, what is the purpose of this call?”

“Just you listen,” she said, “There’s to be a big party, and—”

And she went on to tell a story we couldn’t have dreamed up in a million years.

The Perahera festival made August the most festive time of year in Kandy. I hadn't been able to go to the last one because I was in Provence at the time. Saul showed me photos: costumed elephants and their handlers parading through the streets, touting a relic casket carrying the tooth of the Buddha. It looked like fun, with lots of bright colors and a cacophony of percussion instruments.

It was October now, and Sri Lanka's rainy season was just around the corner. Fortunately, the weather behaved, and Saul's house in Kandy was as festive as the height of Perahera.

"Yapa, could you take the biryani into the garden?"

"Thank you so much for all the help, Kumara. Why don't you go relax now?"

"Rasin, can you grab another pack of ginger beer from by the back door?"

The garden party took over the whole yard. We had put up three umbrellas, set up a squadron of tables, played music, erected a cover over the tables in case of rain, and served enough food to feed the partygoers for several days straight. I couldn't have done it all myself. Aside from Kumara, who came here every day, I paid some of the neighbors to lend a hand.

Ms. Darling's shocking news was to blame.

"Say what? You're their lead designer?"

"I know! I was stunned!" Maya giggled. "Of course, I won the competition fair and square."

"But it's *Gargantua*. You agreed to work with Gargantua?"

After the cruise ship incident—which still angered me to think about—the world-famous jewelry brand Gargantua was accused of sweeping sexual harassment under the rug and underwent huge layoffs. Even I, as out of the loop as I was, heard about it. The news mentioned something or other about plans for an external audit—but anyway, I knew next to nothing about it. I tried to forget all about that brand and hoped that was the end of it. I had never expected their new designer to be...well, her.

"Well, I hear they'll continue to use other top designers for their luxury jewelry—for the flagship models, you know—but that's

only a fraction of their big billboard work, now isn't it? As for the rest… You can think of it like a supermarket. They need lots and lots of designers for all the milk, sugar, soy sauce—all the daily essentials, no? Besides, all of their most promising talent quit."

Daily essentials were basically the flagship offerings of any supermarket. If the company succeeded in losing its shady reputation, it could be reborn as the "new" Gargantua and establish a firm foothold for itself in the industry. To that end, Gargantua held a competition for the position of lead designer, with each entrant required to submit a design of a necklace, a bracelet, and a ring. Anyone could enter, regardless of experience and resume.

And Ms. Darling won. She destroyed the competition.

"You're speaking to the woman who came out on top," she told us matter-of-factly in the V&A's luxurious café. Richard and I could do nothing but stare at the phone in amazement. I had never seen a hungry Richard leave a cake uneaten on the table for so long. That's how absorbed in the conversation he was.

She surprised us all over again when she explained that she wanted to throw a party to celebrate. A party? Who, what, where, how? Well, the "who" part, I gathered immediately. The "who" was the reason for calling Richard. We were the "who." Ms. Darling had known Saul since her student days, and now we were celebrating her at Saul's very house.

I had never heard of someone asking another person to throw a party in their honor and invite them as a *guest*. It was like hiring someone to throw your own birthday party. I could see it happening for a Hollywood celebrity—but Ms. Darling? And I had only met her once. Still, the tanzanite cuff links she designed for me had turned out to be a great good-luck charm. I owed her a bigger debt than I first thought. But surprisingly, as shrewd as she was, I don't think that was even part of the calculus for her.

Richard and I lost ourselves in the big news and the accompanying stream of "darling"s and "dear"s delivered in that graceful voice, and by the time we realized what was happening, we had agreed to host a party for her at the Kandy house. It was unbelievable. How did that even happen? Granted, we were happy

to play along. When Richard pointed out that it was perfect timing, that was the only encouragement I needed to say yes.

"Iggy, love? Where might I find the plates in this house?"

"The small ones are on the dining room shelves, Joachim. The larger clay plates are in the shed out back. I hate to ask, but would you mind passing them out to people? That'd be a huge help."

"Aye-aye, captain."

Joachim turned and vanished into the house, his sequined high heels poking holes in the dirt of the yard as he went. Jeffrey had voiced his objection to this whole thing from moment one by trying to get dead drunk, but it was hard to get drunk on ginger beer alone. That didn't stop him from acting inebriated and refusing to budge from his lounge chair. Jiro pawed at him, trying to get his attention. *You're a nice guy, aren'tcha? Sure you are! Come play with me.*

I hoped Jeffrey would give in, I thought to myself, as I smoothed down the bottom edge of my sarong and went to help Joachim.

The dining room air was thick with powder.

"Marian, that's more than enough food."

"Nonsense. What kind of party doesn't have steamed buns? Here, let me borrow your steamer. I already put the fortunes in the fortune cookies, the *gan shao mingxia* chili shrimp is ready, and the *you lin ji* chicken is on a plate over there."

"Where did you get this shrimp and chicken from…?"

"Downtown. I borrowed a three-wheeler. My great-uncle used to drive one just like it. Oh, don't worry, I used the key—I didn't hotwire it. Are you looking for Vince, Seigi? Someone called him away after he wrapped all those buns for me."

This cheerful, giggling woman wearing my lotus-flower-patterned apron was Marian Lai. She'd come all the way from America. I must have told her about forty times that she could just relax and enjoy herself—there was no need to do the cooking or cleaning—but the moment I turned my back on her, she made our dining room smell as good as the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. If I had had someone like her waiting for me at home, my diet would

have been doomed. I wished Vince all the happiness of a married man living large and enjoying the good life.

By “perfect timing,” Richard meant that the party could mark the conclusion of this series of events that began with the cruise ship incident. It was, he said, a good opportunity to thank everyone and congratulate Maya. She agreed, saying that sounded more fun than a party where she lorded over everyone else as the sole guest of honor. Whether or not I believed *that*, I did think the more the merrier.

A chance to thank and treat everyone involved sounded perfect to me. I had lots of people I wanted to invite: the guest of honor Ms. Darling herself, Vince and Marian (obviously), Henry and Jeffrey, Joachim if he would come, my boss and Saul, Kumara after all the help she gave me during my time in Sri Lanka, and…

“Seigi, this is *magnifique*! Did you make this yourself?”

“That’s correct. It’s called *watalappan*. It’s kind of like a pudding.”

“Goodness me! What a dangerous dish. If my dear Richard lived here, he would blow up like a blimp. Oh my goodness.”

With every goodness, Catherine spooned up another mouthful of *watalappan*. She was more dazzling than a Hollywood actress, more charming than a clerk in a fancy boutique. The red patterned dress she wore was as eye-catching as a tropical flower. When I contacted her with an invite—I mean, why not?—she responded immediately to say that no party was complete without her presence. Then she went straight to asking about flights.

Just to be on the safe side, I warned her that I couldn’t pay for her. Fortunately, she laughed at me and told me not to be silly. The neighbors watched her from the other side of the white fence bordering the garden, probably wondering what was making her beam so brightly. Whenever Catherine tipped them a wink or a small grin, they scattered. I found the whole interaction super cute. Sure enough, I reflected, most women in this area were nothing like Catherine.

“Tell me, Seigi, where is Richard?”

“He’s not over there? Maybe he’s taking a break.”

“Well, if you see him, tell him I want to talk. There’s just so much I want to ask about the two of you. How have things been since we last chatted?”

“…Eventful, that’s for sure.”

“But of course. That’s life.”

Catherine’s voice was as clear and beautiful as I remembered it. She smiled and waved like a model, promising she’d be right back, and I went further into the garden. I didn’t think they’d be out right now—it was too loud for them—but a family of porcupines lived in the sprawling woods behind the house and sometimes could be seen right next to the kitchen shed. Their spines were sharp and could be dangerous for any guests who hadn’t dealt with porcupines before. Joachim, for one, would have screamed if he saw one. I wanted to shoo away any that might have been lurking nearby, so I grabbed the broom leaning up against the wall of the house and headed out back behind the kitchen shed.

Then I heard two people talking. One was a voice I recognized without trying. Richard’s. The other was—well, I didn’t have to guess that one, either. It was Vince’s.

The two were deep in a conversation in a place where no one was likely to stumble upon them. From my angle, only their backs were visible. It reminded me of that first night on the cruise ship. Back then, when Richard asked Vince to watch out for me, I had no idea who Vince was, and my only thought was *What if someone tries to hurt Richard?* Both of them had been concerned about me.

But this time around, I wasn’t the topic of conversation. I only heard a little bit, but it sounded like they were making small talk—exchanging life updates, or something else to that effect. I didn’t see any signs of porcupines, so I made a quick trip back to the kitchen to return the broom. By the time I got back in my hiding spot, Vince was gone.

Richard noticed me. “Oh? Who do we have here?”

I lifted the cup of tea in my right hand to show it to him. “I brought you royal milk tea.”

“Thank you very much.”

The cup in my other hand was supposed to have been for Vince, but with him gone, I decided to drink it instead. I explained—rather guiltily—that I hadn't been trying to eavesdrop. I had just stumbled upon them when I came to bring them tea. Richard cracked a small smile. Either he bought my excuse or didn't mind me overhearing a not-very serious conversation. Which was it?

"Did you guys get a chance to talk things out?"

"We did."

Good. Considering the volume and complexity of the bad blood between Vince and Richard, the phrase "reconciling" sounded almost too casual. At the same time, look what happened to Richard and Jeffrey. If those two had managed to talk it out—if that level of communication was possible—then maybe Vince and Richard had a chance. Maybe not now, but someday soon.

For someone who had arrived with Marian, Vince was good at making himself scarce. Even after we cleaned up the mess of the party at the end of the night, Marian reported he didn't go back to the house where she was. But a month or so later, I got a thank-you message from Marian on my computer. He must have resigned himself to his steamed bun-wrapping fate at some point.

Looking back on it, so much had happened since I had first come to Sri Lanka. To me, to all the people in my life, to the world at large. And yet time marched on like nothing changed.

It was strange. Now that I was closing in on my mid-twenties, I felt like I was starting to get a hang of this whole "being alive" thing. And there was no doubt about it—I had the man sipping royal milk tea next to me to thank.

Richard beat me to the punch before I could do just that. "Seigi, I have gifts to pass along to you."

"From Vince?"

"No."

Richard reached into his inner jacket pocket and pulled out a large package. It must have been quite a trick, fitting something so big into such a small pocket. Anyway, the package contained three things: a square-shaped present box the size of a sheet of B5 paper wrapped in blue flower-patterned wrapping paper; another box

wrapped in more of the same, this one about the size of my hand; and a white envelope. A letter?

"What are these?"

"Gifts from Octavia to you."

Oh, I thought. *I see.*

I didn't think she would come, but I still gave Vince a party invitation to pass along to her. She didn't respond either way, which was more or less what I had expected. After spending so much time alone, I imagined attending a loud, raucous party would have been difficult for her. Henry had made the right call inviting her to the ring ceremony instead of the funeral.

At Richard's encouragement, I tore open the biggest package first. Inside was a thick, heavy ledger with two women's signatures on the cover. It was the same ledger Henry had shown us: the records of all the fake jewelry transactions Leah made and Octavia's grandmother managed as her second trustee.

"It is yours to keep. It has little significance to us now."

No, no, no. Even if all the transactions happened close to a hundred years ago, this ledger was full of people's personal information. Worse, the people in it could all be traced to English aristocrats living today. It could be linked back to living people. The Claremont brothers had worked themselves to the bone fighting the tax audit that the butlers had been so worried about, and in the end, the tax board decided to overlook the falsified jewelry. If the ledger were brought to light again, I knew they wouldn't be so forgiving. It was partially thanks to the butlers' efforts that the Claremonts had gotten off easy, so in the end, maybe it was a good thing the butlers had been that concerned.

Richard saw me overthinking; I must have been making some horrible face. So when I asked him if he could hold on to it for me, he smiled, put his hand to his chest, and accepted it. *Whew.* The ledger would leave my possession and go back to its rightful place.

When I said as much, Richard made an odd face.

"Hm? What's the matter?"

"Nothing. It's merely a strange coincidence."

"What is?"

"...The phrase 'leave for its rightful place' is one my grandmother once said to me."

A rightful place. Was that, like, a thing? Or a person? Richard tilted his head in contemplation when I asked, which I thought was an odd reaction. Maybe it could have been both. A "rightful place" sounded like an inescapable, preordained fate, but from what I knew, Leandra—Leah—led a life unbound by fate. She married for love and came to England, shielded her husband from its aristocracy, and raised her children there. I wondered if she ever felt like England was her rightful place. If so, then she was a very strong soul. She reminded me of my grandmother.

"We both sure had amazing grandmothers, huh?" I joked.

A shadow of Richard's usual beautiful expression lingered on his face. "Yes, I suppose," he said, but it sounded like he didn't mean it.

I wondered what that was all about as I opened the second package. This one held a piece of amber wrapped in a ball of cotton. It was the same chunk of amber Octavia always wore around her neck. What was it doing here?

"According to my grandmother's ledger, this amber is authentic. However, it was indeed one of the gems she distributed, and the butlers hoped to reclaim it. Instead, Vince suggested I give it to you, and you would understand what to do with it. I take it this cryptic comment means something to you."

"Yeah. It does."

I remembered Octavia's so-called plan and picked up the shiny golden gem. The amber was mounted in a bed of gold bullion, polished, and cut into a gorgeous cabochon. I could see air bubbles inside, which would have proved it was artificial if this had been a ruby or sapphire. But the opposite was true in amber. Air would get trapped in the sap as it ran and hardened into "stone."

Amber. *Elektron* in ancient Greek and *kohaku*, a word whose characters came from China, in Japanese. The *ko* character meant "a tiger lying down," while the *haku* represented "this gemstone." Together, that meant amber was a jewel that resembled a tiger sprawled on its side. Amber's soft colors and fun lumpiness made the ancient Greeks picture thunder and lightning, while the

Chinese, a tiger. I thought the dramatic difference between the two was something precious. Something incredible. Maybe because it was like the gemstone was telling me everyone could look at the same thing and draw completely different conclusions.

"This specimen of amber exhibits fluorescence and originated in the Dominican Republic. Counting carats is a tasteless exercise when it comes to amber. The hardened sap is a time capsule of the Earth from long, long ago."

"Don't worry. I'll be passing it along to someone else soon."

"Ah. I see I am not the only one who treats you like a safety deposit box."

"Yup, just put in the Bank of Nakata. I'll take good care of it."

At the very least, I would make sure she didn't lose one more thing she loved.

The last item was the white envelope. I slit it open with a finger and pulled out a pink greeting card. The message inside was very short.

Dear Mr. Seigi Nakata,

Followed by an English expression wishing me well: *Take care of yourself.*

It could also be read as a reminder to, quite literally, watch out for my well-being. Like a prayer wishing the Bank of Nakata health and happiness. *Okay, Octavia,* I thought. *I will.*

I was privately grateful she hadn't addressed the card to a hero striving for justice. Octavia knew the basics about me—my work background, my basic bio—when we met in Nuwara Eliya, but I got the feeling she didn't have much information on who I was as a person. Likewise, I was glad to receive this message because it wasn't the kind of thing someone who didn't care about herself would send. *What a relief.* A small relief, maybe, but one that led to a positive future.

I smiled and hugged the card to my chest. Unfortunately, I didn't have a jacket or pockets in these pants. I would need to run back to my room and put it away there.

I left Richard with a promise to catch up with him later, hurried to my room—which was a mess, what with today's party prep—put

both items down, and ran back outside. It was two o'clock, which meant it was almost time.

I passed through the garden, keeping an eye out for a three-wheeler, and bumped into Ms. Darling with a cocktail glass in hand. Today her outfit was an eye-popping black-and-purple dress, a huge black straw sunhat-like doohickey, and brand-name black sneakers. This was the outfit of someone who knew the shape of the roads in Sri Lanka. Beyond that, I wondered how she could down cocktail after cocktail without ever getting drunk.

"My, my. Now just where is the host of this lovely party going, darling?"

"There's another guest arriving at any minute, so…"

"Someone I've met before?"

"Um… I don't think so, but you might have seen him. For a split second…"

"The plot thickens."

"You've seen Henry, right? Oh, excuse me. The Earl of Claremont, I mean."

"An *earl*, you say? You're telling me that little princeling is an earl? And single? He must give high society *a lot* to talk about!"

I wasn't so sure myself. Henry could be tough as nails in his own way. Any future problem he might have faced would have been nothing compared to everything he had gone through. I knew he could handle whatever else life might throw at him.

But anyway, we had two things to celebrate today. One, Ms. Darling's new position at Gargantua. Two, Henry's new title as the Earl of Claremont. We hadn't exactly felt festive back in England, given the timing of his father's death. But things were different in Sri Lanka. *In Sri Lanka, anything goes, right?* I said to myself. Besides, Henry and Jeffrey must have been sick and tired of formalities and paperwork. They needed a change of pace.

The moment I knew Henry was coming, I reached out to one more guest, who luckily RSVPed yes. I could have kept this a secret until the party, but when I ran that idea past Jeffrey, he cautioned against it. If it shocked Henry badly enough, Jeffrey warned, Henry might go back to being a recluse. So, in the end, I reluctantly called

up Henry a few days prior and told him of the other guest—a friend studying in Spain. An old pal from my university days.

The one and only Haruyoshi Shimomura. He knew Henry as Enrique Wasabi, his flamenco jam session buddy, and was presently polishing his guitar skills while he wandered the Granada-to-Madrid circuit.

For a few moments, Henry was too stunned to speak. Just as I started to freak out—maybe I shouldn't have invited Haruyoshi after all—Henry said, "No, no. It's quite all right." Then he went quiet. I wasn't sure what to do.

Several minutes passed in silence, too long for a phone call with one other person, before Henry mumbled, "I still haven't told him who I really am."

"What?"

"...At most, he thinks I'm simply rather well-off."

"Um..."

"...I have yet to even mention anything about being an earl."

It was a problem I had expected, but a problem nonetheless. I gave it some thought. What if I broke the news to Haruyoshi? *Hey, Shimomura, try not to be too surprised. That Enrique Wasabi guy I introduced you to? Turns out he comes from a line of earls. Just became the tenth earl the other day, in fact. Anyway, so now he's Lord Claremont.* Haruyoshi would have laughed his ass off for sure. *You and your jokes, Seigi. Where's the punchline?*

Silenced by that sobering thought, Henry and I passed a moment saying nothing. Then, awkwardly, I suggested, "Uh...why don't we tell him the truth at the party?"

What other choice did we have? Haruyoshi followed Jeffrey on social media. That Haruyoshi's music buddy Enrique was related to *the* financial influencer Jeffrey Claremont would have been shocking enough. Worse, Enrique was the older cousin of my divinely compassionate boss, Richard. And on top of all that, he was an English earl. That was more surprise than any one man could stomach.

That was why, I decided, it was best to tell him the most important facts first and give it time to sink in. For his mental well-

being, that is. To skip the hour or so of mutual silences that followed—I felt like most of that phone call was spent with neither of us talking—Henry eventually conceded that I was probably right.

Which brings me back to today.

Haruyoshi was coming by plane to Kandy and, from there, by taxi to the house. If I hadn't been run ragged planning the party, I would have gone to pick him up. For better or for worse, I just sent him a map to the house so he would know exactly where to find us. That way, the taxi driver wouldn't get lost.

I scanned the yard and found Henry curled up next to Jeffrey on a lounge chair like a caterpillar. Did he have a stomachache? It didn't seem like he had eaten too much. Jeffrey rubbed Henry's back as he took deep, steadying breaths and pressed his crossed fingers to his forehead as if in prayer.

I was about to hurry over and ask if he was okay, but just then, I heard the engine of an approaching car. Henry and I, equally hypersensitive, jumped. We hurried to the garden gate.

A sky-blue cab puttered up the steep hill toward us, an Asian man's face pressed to the backseat window. There was no mistaking who that man was.

"Shimomura! Shimomura!" I windmilled my arms to catch the taxi driver's attention. The headlights flashed, signaling, "I get it, okay?" and in moments, the taxi pulled up and stopped in front of the garden. The door opened, and Haruyoshi leaped out of the backseat, threw his arms wide, and gave me a hug.

"Seigi, my dude! It's been too long. Remember what to call me?"

"...Haruyoshi!"

"Ah ha ha, took you a sec."

"I know, I know! Sorry, I'm still not used to saying it out loud. I'm glad you could make it."

"Man, I've never been to Southern Asia before. My buddy from school who lives in Myanmar kept giving me warnings, but this place is nice! I saw an elephant walking around earlier. Startled the crap out of me."

"Yeah, they live in the mountains around here."

As I took his luggage, I heard a quaking voice far behind me. There it was again. It wasn't until the third time when the voice spoke up that Haruyoshi noticed.

"...H-Haruyoshi?"

It was Henry.

When Haruyoshi saw Henry standing against the backdrop of the garden, arms outstretched, his face lit up. He opened his arms wide and barreled straight toward Henry into a hug. It was so casual, like a puppy leaping at him, that I almost couldn't believe this was the same imposing figure whose finger Richard and Jeffrey had kissed.

"Enrique! It's my first time seeing you in person! I'm so happy. How are you? How's life?"

In Henry's stiff Japanese, he responded, "I am very happy, too! I am doing well. And life is, uh...same shit, different day."

Haruyoshi roared with laughter. "Good memory! Man, you sure are taller than I expected."

I blanched and looked away in horror. I prayed Richard and Jeffrey hadn't heard any of this conversation. I didn't have to stretch my imagination to know what they might do if they discovered who taught Henry all those curse words he'd rattled off in Nuwara Eliya. Because it was crystal clear this was all my fault. Worse, Richard still hadn't said a word to me about the entire incident.

"Haruyoshi?"

"What's up?"

"I must tell you something. I will say it in English."

Henry screwed up his face in preparation. Haruyoshi realized how serious he looked and stopped short on his way over to the buffet table.

"Yeah, sure. You can tell me anything."

Haruyoshi nodded. He was ready to catch whatever bombshell Henry was preparing to drop. Henry visibly relaxed, just a hair, and then the tone of Lord Henry Claremont's speech performed a 180. It was such a complete metamorphosis that it was like an actor throwing back his dirty cloak to reveal a fine tuxedo underneath.

“It is an honor to meet you,” Henry began in exemplary British English, “and I am most pleased that you could come.” He stood up taller and declared, “My name is Henry Claremont, the tenth Earl of Claremont and the successor of my late father’s lands and titles. I must sincerely apologize for keeping my origin a secret from you for so long. You are much younger than me, and you come from a completely different world. I feared you would think me some pompous toff if you knew who I was. Now, however, I see that it was a grave insult to ever assume such a thing of you. My apologies, and I hope you will forgive me.”

Henry sounded like he was on the verge of tears. I clasped my hands together as hope swelled within me. In Nuwara Eliya, Henry had conducted himself like a grand gentleman, but now he was the same Henry I had known before. Maybe both those people were part of Henry.

On the one hand, I felt kind of relieved. On the other, I was scared of Haruyoshi’s reaction. The ball was in his court.

My old school friend stared blankly at Henry for a moment before cracking an awkward smile and shaking his head. “Man, of all the things you coulda said… Enrique—Henry, I mean. I would never think badly of you. You, pompous? Nah. You’ve always been super nice to me. What am I supposed to forgive you for? I don’t mind any of that earl crap. Let’s be friends, okay? Let’s make some more music together.”

He bowed, sort of as a joke, to seal the agreement. Now I felt like I wanted to cry, too, and Henry teared up harder than ever.

Boy, this Haruyoshi Shimomura. I might have misjudged his courage. I mean, this was a man who went all by himself to Spain to learn flamenco guitar. Spain had aristocrats as well, and there was no rule that said you had to be shy when the head of an ancient line of nobility popped up out of nowhere. In hindsight, shyness would have been rude—after the two of them had connected through music and all. There was no status in music. No borders. No languages. Nothing extra, nothing unnecessary. No obstacles could bar the way of music played with sincerity. It was like a jewel that always shone bright, no matter who it belonged to.

Deep down, I envied what Henry and Haruyoshi had. *Hey, Richard can play the violin,* I thought. Too bad I didn't play any instruments.

Henry walked off, a spring in his step and a look of relief on his face, to introduce Haruyoshi—still pronounced in that broken Japanese—to his family. Haruyoshi smiled just as brightly. I was glad. So very, very glad things had turned out this way.

With that, I turned to walk away, too, when Haruyoshi snapped back to face me and darted over. What? What was his problem?!

"Hey, Seigi? Can you, uh, give me a rough translation of what that was all about? I only caught the very final couple of sentences, and I have literally no idea what that first part was. 'Urrl' this, 'urrl' that—what does 'urrl' mean? Like…a URL? A pearl? A squirrel?"

I take back my admiration, I thought.

Just as I was about to explain that "urrl" was the English word *earl*, Urrl Henry yelled for Haruyoshi. My smooth-talking ex-classmate called back, "Coming!" in Spanish and trotted off with an innocent grin.

I put my hands on my sarong-covered hips and stared off into the distance of the garden. It looked like Henry was back to square one.

Saul's house was built with the intent of one day being a hospital, so it had lots of bedrooms. Catherine insisted on having her own hotel room, but aside from her, the rest of us split into groups of two and each had our own room to stay in. I tried to give the neighbors and Kumara a big tip as a thank-you, but they all looked shocked and refused to accept it. To them, I would simply return the favor someday when they needed help. The concept of accepting money for helping with a party was foreign to them. I appreciated it, but I felt bad for that appreciation at the same time. I knew I would need to make some hearty biryani or samosas to gift them instead.

Even with that, I enjoyed the party. Once I finished cleaning up, I took a turn around the garden in the dark and thought to

myself that we would have to throw another party one of these days.

A jeans-clad pair of legs on the lounge chair that I was just about to drag back inside caught my eye. *Who on Earth showed up to this party in jeans?* I thought, rudely, and glared at the individual.

"Yes, dear?"

The voice was beautiful. It belonged to Ms. Darling.

"Oh, come now, don't look so shocked. Surely you don't think I traveled without a change of clothes!"

"R-right, sorry."

"Don't you worry about it, dear. Now you sit yourself down and come talk to me."

There was no point arguing with Ms. Darling once she got like this. I had learned that lesson way back with the Tokyo Station bullet train exit experience.

I sat down on the lounge chair next to her. After a while, Ms. Darling said, "Do you mind if I tell you a little about myself?"

"...Sure. Whatever you're comfortable sharing."

"Thank you, dear. You see, I used to have a sister."

Used to. A story starting in the past tense.

Maya's older sister was named Masago—*sand* in Japanese. Partially due to her name, she had loved stones since she was little, and Maya's desire to become a jewelry designer stemmed from wanting to spend time with her big sister. The two used to daydream about opening a store together before Masago went off to get married. And then...

"...It was a car accident that did it. It all happened so fast. I never imagined such a thing could happen to her, and I'm sure my sister didn't, either. It felt like there must have been some kind of mistake. Often when I go to bed, I remind myself to give my sister a call in the morning, and only then do I realize she's gone. It just takes a second, and a person's life is over."

I had no words to say. I didn't know what it was like to lose someone suddenly. Grandma's death had been sad and brutal, but she passed away long after she was hospitalized. In some sense,

that gave me time to prepare. I still remembered the weight, like a choking sensation, as she clung to life, but I could only wonder just how hard it was to have that blow dealt in an instant. Even the thought alone felt painful.

Ms. Darling gave me an easy smile when she saw the look of pain on my face. “Still, it *did* bring me closer to my sister’s husband. That’s paid off in its own way, I suppose.”

“Yeah? That’s nice to hear.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. You know my sister’s husband.”

“Wait, I do?”

“Saul, darling.”

“Wait, what?!”

I was beyond shocked. *Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. One thing at a time.* Saul had been married? Well, he must have been—he told me as much in Hong Kong. But his wife died young, as all beautiful things do, and—oh. Now I saw what happened.

When I didn’t say anything, Ms. Darling chided me, “My dear boy, do you know why I never call you by your first name?”

“…Because of that ‘Don’t call him Seigi; he’ll get attached’ rule?”

“If by that, you mean it would make Richard unhappy, then you’re exactly right.”

“…Yeah, that is what I meant.”

Ms. Darling laughed. It wasn’t a happy laugh, but neither was it rude. She wasn’t laughing at me. She looked right at me but somehow *through* me to something very, very far away, focusing on it until it was overlaid over my face.

Her red lips moved as she spoke. “And are you fine with that?”

“I mean, I don’t really care what you call me.”

“You know that isn’t what I mean.”

“…”

Richard was the one who first told Saul not to call me by my first name for that exact reason. Now, via Saul, that must have gotten around to Ms. Darling. Did Richard make him do that, I

wondered? I found it hard to believe, but I couldn't deny the possibility.

"...I guess it's his way of looking out for me. It's not like I mind, really. I try my best to keep up with him, but Richard is just too amazing. Like, way too amazing."

"Oh, my dear sweet boy. You are screwed. Royally screwed."

"Have you had too much to drink, Ms. Maya?"

"Pish. I could drink until the cows come home and be fine. Listen—"

"Maya?"

For a split second, I thought, *There's the cow.* But it was Richard, standing behind us with a tray and a sobering cup of mint tea. A shiver ran down my spine, no doubt because of the cool breeze. The weather had behaved itself up until now, but maybe rain was on the way after all.

"Oh dearie me, I *am* interrupting, aren't I? Perhaps I'm a bit tiddly after all. Ta-ta."

I called her name, and she turned back to look at me. Richard was glaring in a way that kind of frightened me, but I pretended not to see that. "I was going to say, I don't care who uses my first name. It doesn't matter what Saul says. I can't imagine myself getting 'attached' to anyone but Richard."

Which meant it was fine for her to call me Seigi. Her eyes widened in surprise and, a beat later, she burst out laughing. "Oh? Well, then it is what it is. Pardon me, Seigi Nakata. It appears I had the wrong idea about you. And now, I'm off! I won't say another word."

She waved and vanished into the house, cackling all the way. She certainly acted drunk, but her eyes looked as clear as they did earlier. The thought *It's handy that someone so good at holding her alcohol can pretend to be drunk whenever she wants* wandered across my mind as Richard took the spot Ms. Darling had just vacated. He offered the tray with its cup of tea to me like one of those Japanese tea-carrying dolls.

"Richard?"

"Take it."

“O-okay.”

“Now drink.”

“You got it, boss.”

Richard and Ms. Darling both had that way of talking that prevented arguing back. Even so, it wasn’t overpowering or daunting. Saul’s pupils sure made an odd pair.

The steaming hot mint tea was delicious. The first time I had ever had mint tea was in the airport on the way back from France. It was made by bundling long sprigs of mint together, bending the bundle into a U-shape, placing the U in a heat-resistant cup, and adding boiling water and honey. It tasted wonderful, helped with sore throats, and made for a great refreshment. Royal milk tea could be a little too heavy on the stomach just before bed, but I didn’t have to worry about that problem with mint tea.

But the fact that Richard had made tea for *me* was pretty unusual.

I let the golden liquid cool before taking a sip and letting the taste seep into my core. “Thanks. We really wore ourselves out today, huh?”

“You more so than me. I only joined you yesterday.”

He and I lapsed into an odd silence. I didn’t know where to begin or what to say. I searched my mind until I had a rough game plan, and just as I was about to speak, Richard started talking as if he had just made the exact same decision.

“There’s something I want to say to you—”

“I believe you and I need to have a talk—”

We looked at each other and fell silent. We were both so surprised, we just had to laugh.

Richard frowned, a light crease forming between his eyebrows. “Please. You first.”

“Okay. So the whole thing about getting attached—I just meant it as a figure of speech.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“I mean it. Really.”

“I understand, which is why I said I am aware.”

“All it means is that I can’t imagine liking anyone else the same way I like you.”

Silence.

Richard didn’t look away. His eyes were glued to me as a slightly baffled smile worked its way onto his face. Maybe it was my internal biases speaking, but I thought it looked like a smile of relief. If it was relief, then good.

“Yes, as I have just established, I have been aware of that fact for quite some time now.”

Good.

I thanked him by way of nodding and gestured for him to share whatever he had wanted to say. It was his turn now. However, he said it didn’t matter anymore and refused to talk. I thought he had wanted to talk to me. What had I done to deserve this kind of treatment? I pouted pointedly, which made Richard smile in a so-be-it manner.

“You and I should have a discussion about your career path.”

“Like, my choice between becoming a civil servant or a jeweler?”

“Correct.”

In Japan, the civil service examinations had an unofficial age limit. This was beginning to relax over time, but no one over the age of thirty landed the kind of solid positions I had been hoping for. I had turned twenty-three earlier this year. I wasn’t planning on taking next year’s exam, meaning my next shot would be when I was twenty-five or older.

Did I really want to work in the civil service in Japan?

Richard, I thought, was asking me to give at least a partial answer to that question right here and now. Because it affected Richard’s future plans. Of the two, I was leaning more toward joining the jewelry industry. However, I wanted to keep studying, and I was about to say that just when Richard interrupted.

“Personally speaking, I have nothing but the highest respect for whatever decision you make. With that said…” Richard paused. “I have one request for you.”

What could it have been? Richard had never pressured me like this before. I said he could ask whatever he wanted, but I was kind of scared. Was he going to ask me to leave him? That was the one thing I was *really* scared of.

Richard's blue eyes crinkled slightly as he smiled. "Were I to lose your company entirely, I would miss you something terrible. Therefore, if you would be so kind, I would love for you to make time for me in your schedule once or twice a month regardless of which path to success you pursue."

I fell silent, then sighed before bursting out laughing. That got a chuckle out of Richard, too. "I promise you'll never have to worry about that, so long as I live."

"Is that so?"

"Without you, I would fall apart. As surely as I breathe oxygen or drink water, I promise I'll always come to keep you company."

"Oh, no. I would perform the necessary traveling."

"Maybe. That might be our only option if I go into civil service, but if I become a jeweler, I'm sure we can work it out between our respective schedules."

"Indeed, I suppose we could. But do civil servants not take time off as well?"

"I guess so. I could always go on a trip, then."

"Excellent. I await news of souvenirs eagerly."

"Yeah, me too."

Richard returned my joke with a smile. I felt happy, but also a little sad. I wondered why. Was it the thought of my apprenticeship in Sri Lanka ending? No, that wasn't it. I had spent most of this period of my life globe-trotting, so I was only about as attached to this house in Kandy as Kasaba University or my old apartment in Takadanobaba. These were all important places to me, but the importance was less centered on me so much as the people and things around me.

The reason I felt that slight sadness—well, it was a no-brainer, really. Now that I reflected on it, Richard had said something like this earlier today, too. Huh.

He pursed his lips, as if he didn't agree with the light of recognition dawning on my face. Whenever he expressed his grumpiness like that, I knew he wasn't truly grumpy at all.

"Whatever are you thinking of now?"

"It's just…"

The thing we talked about earlier today. The thing about objects having a rightful place. If things always left to go back to their rightful places…if that was true…

"Richard, I have two—no, make that one favor I'd like to ask of you."

"Whatever might that be?"

I cut myself off before I could ask for both. This wasn't the right time to bring it up. I needed a little more—how to put it—*experience* before I broached that topic. But the other favor could be asked right now. Yes, it had to be now or never.

"…Just know, it's only if you want to."

"By all means."

"Richard, would you be my… Um, my… Um. My."

"Your?"

"Th-th-the," I stuttered, for all the good that did. It might as well have been a life preserver with a hole in it. *Calm down, Seigi. Take that long shot. Take that running leap. The ground below is soft enough. I think.*

Eventually, my mouth remembered how to work correctly. "Richard, would you be the object of my affection?"

Silence fell in that space bordered by the mosquito netting.

Richard looked shocked. His expression lacked the coldness that usually accompanied his "Oh? Is that so?" dismissals. There was warmth in that face he wore, like he was looking at a child. *Oh no, not again.* I jumped right to my conclusion without explaining my full thought process.

"Here me out. By the object of my affection, I mean—"

"What it sounds like, I'm sure."

"Well, yes. But it's not what you think."

“What isn’t?”

“Um, I… If I had to explain what an object of affection is…”

Richard shut down my babbling with a crisp “I see.” There was a dispassionate chill to his voice, but I didn’t take that as a bad sign. Honestly, not at all.

“An object of one’s affection. What rich nuances this phrase contains. It is a simple descriptor, yet it boasts such myriad possible meanings.”

“Y-yes.”

“To check, do you mean that I am someone you care about deeply?”

“…Yes, I guess so.”

“Someone that you wish to cherish.”

“That’s correct.”

“A person with whom you wish to take trips, eat meals, or pet the dog.”

“Yes, exactly!”

“A person for whom you would feel sadness were they come to harm or vanish without forewarning.”

“…Yes. Exactly.”

I knew Richard might not agree to it, but I hoped he would. I said, “So please, don’t do that to me. Because you know I’d never do it to you.”

Richard laughed. What an open laugh it was. “You’re asking for everything to stay the same. No?”

“What?”

“How exactly would it be different from the relationship we’ve had thus far?”

Now that he mentioned it, I really couldn’t think of anything. Our relationship went by a lot of names. Boss and employee. Junior and senior colleagues. Friends. Each one added a new layer to the relationship. So, Richard was asking, where was the harm in adding one more?

It almost sounded like he was saying, “You’re only asking me this now?”

Honestly, this changed nothing at all. I cared about this person very much, and Richard likewise cherished me. That’s why I could say I loved him very much, and that’s all there was to it.

“You have a point,” I said. “Nothing would change.”

“Then why did the question make you so anxious? You were only asking if we would maintain our status quo, were you not?”

You’re not wrong, but that doesn’t mean you should say it. Even though Richard was British instead of Japanese, I had assumed he would understand the full nuance the phrase “object of my affection” carried. He did—brazenly so—and for that, I was immensely gratified. He threw me a bone there, and I appreciated it.

“So, is that a yes?”

“Yes, and I am still baffled as to why you would seek my permission to maintain the current state of our relationship. Be that as it may—yes. You may treat me as the object of your affection.”

I had never heard a *yes* so soft, so accepting, in my life.

With that, Richard prompted me to ask the other favor I had started to bring up. I did want to say it, but I knew I really shouldn’t. My intuition told me now wasn’t the right time. I needed to grow a bit first—at least as a jeweler.

I said as much to Richard, who gave me a small smile in response. “Very well,” he said, and he didn’t press the issue further. *Thanks,* I thought. Had he not backed down, I had full faith Seigi Nakata’s marshmallow-like defenses would have crumbled.

We had done enough today. Richard had accepted the title of object of my affection, and that was enough to make me happy. Truth be told, I was hoping for a little more besides, but I knew that could wait for later down the road. When I had grown as a person.

The night sky in Sri Lanka was full of stars. Looking up from the provincial mountain town of Kandy, the sky’s black curtain was speckled everywhere with pinpricks of light, save for the black outline of the jungle below. Even through the mosquito nets, I could

see the stars twinkling in clear relief. There was nothing to blot out the starlight.

"Uh—uaaah."

"What was that? That was awfully loud for a yawn."

"Nothing. Forget about it."

Honestly, I had been about to start talking. But I stopped. Some things were best kept hidden. It was just a small wish of mine. A really trivial one. As if making a wish on an imaginary falling star, I said a little too loud, "I wish my 'rightful place' would be right next to you."

There was no response from Richard. I had expected him to laugh, so I turned my head and found him staring back at me in disbelief.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing at all. Or...well, perhaps there is. Where, dare I ask, did that come from...?"

"It's what you said earlier! People and things always *leave* for their rightful place. So, all I was doing was hoping my rightful place winds up being right next to you. Richard? Hey, Richard?"

"Look. A shooting star."

"Whoa! You should have told me earlier! Where'd it go?! Oh, never mind. There will be other ones."

I looked up at the sky through the mosquito nets. Shooting stars were distant celestial objects. I had seen plenty of them, of course, through the glass panes of my window sans mosquito nets. But never through the nets.

If Richard said he saw a falling star, there must have been one. His voice shook a little as he said it, but I believed him. He would never have made me look up just so I wouldn't see his face. Besides, even if that was all it was, I still wanted to find a shooting star. So I looked up. For some reason I couldn't quite explain, I felt like I wanted to cry.

The quiet sobbing that followed lasted an eternity. However, by the time I looked over at Richard, his face was composed. He might have blown his nose once or twice, but I had heard and seen

nothing. This man was as beautiful as ever, but at this exact moment, it was perilous for me. His beauty was more sublime than any shooting star.

"...I couldn't find any," I said.

"Perhaps another time, then."

"Yeah."

Although this was the tropics, the air cooled off quick once the sun went down. A task awaited us in the morning—not part two of the party, but breakfast for all of the guests. Maybe it was time for us hosts to call it a night.

I started to get up and suggest we go inside when I stumbled. The hem of my fancy sarong was caught in something. I turned to see what it had snagged on and saw a pale hand tugging at my clothes, like the hand of a child trailing their parent in a department store.

I sat back down and asked what Richard wanted. He picked up the tea tray that the mint tea had come from and dropped it in my lap with a crash. Was he trying to weigh me down, like with a heavy stone?

"Sit. Don't leave yet."

"...You didn't need to pin me down, you know. I'm not going anywhere."

"Indeed?"

"Yeah."

I inhaled a lungful of Sri Lankan night. The air was humid, insects fluttered out past the mosquito nets, and Richard was beautiful. Best of all, it was thrilling to have someone I cared about tell me, "No, stay. Stay here with me." As I sipped my now cool cup of mint tea, I mused that I should give the white sapphire in my safe at home a good polishing.

Just as I thought to myself how nice it would be to stay here for a few more minutes making small talk, I heard a lonely howl from the house. *Jiro.* Good boy, Jiro, who had been patient with us all day, no matter how many times Joachim accosted him with a petting attack. He may only have been a mutt, the kind you saw everywhere in Sri Lanka, but to me he was my one and only pup. I

called him over, and he wriggled into the gap between Richard and me, begging us both for pets.

“Who’s been a good boy all day? Who has? Who has?” I said as I rubbed him all over. Jiro’s eyes grew happy, and he whined again. He twisted and rolled in the little gap between us like a wild animal taking a dust bath. What a cute critter.

And yet…

I wondered if I would have to keep leaving Jiro all on his own. Probably so, I thought. An idea I had been pondering earlier crossed my mind, and I looked up. “Richard?”

“Yes?”

“I have something very important to discuss with you.”

A tense look stole over Richard’s pale face. A few moments later, he said, “Go right ahead.” His expression was unreadable.

He was just too beautiful. It made me reel. Why was he so beautiful to me lately? Or did I have it backward? Why did Richard’s beauty pierce a hole in me and lodge deep in my eyes these days? Saul once said his beauty grew stronger every day like magic, and I couldn’t have agreed more. But that aside…

“Hey, Richard, what if…”

“Yes?”

“…What if we got another dog?”

Jiro growled as if he didn’t like that idea. Richard stared at me dumbfounded, before smiling at me with the glee of a child.

Epilogue

EVEN ON WEEKDAYS, Ginza bustled with people. People from all nations, people of all walks of life. People, people, people. Such an absurd number of people that picking a single one out of the crowd was an exercise in futility. Languages jumbled together. Old, young, male, female—the place buzzed with tourists snapping photos.

I hid myself away from the hubbub. I was waiting for someone. They would be here any minute now, I told myself. Any minute now. With the building to my back, I scanned the crowds to my left and right. It was still another thirty minutes before we were supposed to meet, but knowing them, they could easily have shown up thirty minutes early and waited for *me*.

Besides, I didn't mind waiting. I kind of liked it, in fact. I knew that if I waited long enough, someone would always come and join me. *There's no more indulgent use of time,* I thought as my eyes traveled up a tall skyscraper. Just then, I heard a voice calling my name from far away.

"Seigi!"

The familiar sound elicited a wave of auditory nostalgia. Or maybe it was being in Ginza that did it.

I turned and was met with a beautiful man marching up to me smartly, a suitcase rolling behind him. Richard.

"Hey there! Sorry if I gave you the wrong idea—I just got here too early."

"What a coincidence. So did I."

"Well…okay then. So…?"

"Yes. So…?"

So, we went to Shiseido Parlor. Aka the building where we had agreed to meet. We had our usual back-and-forth about being hungry, what to eat, and yadda yadda. I said to myself that an omelet sounded good, and Richard smiled. It really was just like old times, his smile seemed to say. I felt the same way.

All through the elevator ride up to the parlor, I mulled over this bittersweet, this awkward, this wonderful and fascinating feeling. I watched myself through the mirrors on the ceiling. *Whatever.* I

decided to ignore the feeling for the moment. This was my very last chance to do so.

The Ginza Étranger shop was closed on weekdays and open on Saturdays and Sundays. However, Saul was starting to complain that we had been closed too many weekends and were struggling to connect with our customers. I decided to pick up some of his favorite red bean jelly for him as a result.

Today, I was here on business. Mr. Seigi Nakata had come all the way from where he was based in Sri Lanka to formally visit Étranger.

“With no further ado, Mr. Nakata, allow me to offer you a hearty congratulations on acquiring your FGA.”

“Thank you, Saul. You were right. I ran out of time on that final exam, and I thought I was going to die.”

My boss laughed and said I hadn’t changed a bit. Then, he said, “Now, I should like to hear what your future plans are.”

That’s the question I was here to answer. That’s why I was told to come.

My two-year grace period was up. I was no longer that twenty-three-year-old. I was twenty-five. The time had come for me to make my choice: be a civil servant, or be a jeweler?

Saul arranged this meeting in honor of me completing my FGA. He called it a celebration, but I knew my boss well enough to know he would never do something so simple and charitable.

So.

I had put a lot of thought into my decision. I know, I know. Me, thinking? Surprising, right?

This was my one and only chance to say what I wanted to say. So, to begin with, I extended my thanks to Saul and Richard for giving me the opportunity to live in Sri Lanka and for everything else they’d done for me. There was so much to say that I struggled to convey it with words. Where language failed, I simply bowed as much as I could.

When that was done, I straightened up and faced Saul. Richard took his place standing behind me. That position, I thought, was maybe a blessing in disguise.

“I’m sorry, Saul. I don’t think I’m cut out to be a jeweler.”

“Oh? Well, that settles that.”

“But I don’t plan on going into civil service, either.”

Now Saul looked a little surprised. I owed him a bit more of an explanation than that.

So, I turned to the beautiful man behind me wearing a slight frown. “Richard, I’m sorry to put you on the spot, but can I pose a suggestion to you?”

“To me?”

“Yes,” I affirmed.

Never had I wanted to look so confident and trustworthy as I did in that moment. If only I was as courageous as I pretended to be.

“Could I be your personal secretary to support you in all your business affairs?”

A personal secretary—I didn’t know what other term to use, so that would have to do for now. A role that ideally encompassed every duty, even those outside the scope of traditional secretary or assistant positions. That included work for Richard the jeweler, Richard the wealthy aristocrat plagued by problems of inheritance, and, if it was ever necessary, anything and everything beyond that. I wanted to be his all-purpose assistant. To have his back in every way. Put another way, maybe it was like being a butler.

That, I declared, was what I wanted most.

Saul remained quiet for several moments before lifting a finger to ask a question. *Go right ahead.* If he had questions, I had answers.

“Am I understanding that you wish to support Richard’s business as a jeweler?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then why not make better use of your FGA diploma? Why not strike out on your own and become an independent jeweler

yourself?"

"I never planned to leave the jewelry industry entirely. But I'd like to support Richard in a more comprehensive fashion, and I think it would be too risky to leave all my eggs in the one basket."

"Risky in what way?"

It wasn't just a matter of what-ifs—what if Richard wanted to leave the jewelry business someday, what if *I* wanted to, etc., etc. The problem was bigger than that. If I went off on my own with the intention of starting my own business, I knew I would be forced to put my clients' needs first. As a jeweler, that entailed catering to the needs of people who wanted to look at gems or be introduced to Ms. Darling after her newest designs took off. As a civil servant, that was handling all the work that trickled down to me from above.

I had...well, kind of an issue with that. See, after some serious thought, I came to the conclusion that if Richard was in trouble on the other side of the planet, I was the sort of person who would drop everything and run to buy a plane ticket. My actions over these last two years—no, long before that—proved it. When I said as such to a student I had known since my university days who now posted his music all over social media, he said, "You're actually the worst." And that was the end of that.

Personally, I thought anyone who ranked their private interests—like their spouse, or kid, or whatever—over their professional interests would struggle in any field that required putting the customer first. Doubly so if they were a worrywart and the object of their concern was the kindest, most beautiful person in the world. For such a person, taking on a client was like taking on a level of risk on par with a natural disaster. They simply had to hope their loved ones wouldn't get into any trouble in the meantime. I didn't like that. Worse, I knew it would be a hassle for any hypothetical clients of mine.

I felt bad, but because that was just who I was... Why didn't I combine personal and professional interests? Why not make a job of who I cared about?

During my job search, I had heard plenty of discourse on whether it was a good idea to make a job out of what you loved, although no one seemed to agree on the answer. It essentially came

down to personality and disposition. There was a lot of freedom involved in finding a job. But when it came down to the wire—aka right now, thanks to my reckless behavior—there was no option for me but one.

Richard. It had to be Richard.

My job would be Richard. That was what I wanted. He was, to me and all the complete strangers out there, the safest and happiest option for my occupation. The problem was whether it would make Richard happy, too.

I told Saul all this with utmost sincerity. For the first ten seconds after, he stayed completely silent. Then, exactly at the ten-second mark, his wide mouth split open with laughter. He laughed so hard, his mouth yawned like a genie taking the form of a grandaddy hippopotamus. In the back of my mind, I worried that the owner of the sushi restaurant next door would ask me later what all the racket was about.

"I see! You've certainly made up your mind."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you realize people will think you're leeching off an aristocrat?"

"Saul," Richard rebuked.

I ignored him and barreled on. "I don't mind. I mean, it's true, isn't it? People can call me what they want. What's most important to me are my personal values."

"Namely, being with the man you love?"

"Exactly. Well…maybe not in so many words. It's embarrassing when you put it like that."

"I would imagine most Japanese people feel the way you do, even if they do not express it in such terms."

"Hm? Maybe… I don't know if I would be the best judge of that."

"Well, never mind then."

With all my globe-trotting, I had started to feel like I had forgotten what it meant to be Japanese. But that didn't matter. Saul was right—I did want to be with the man I loved.

Still, Richard and I were only human. It was entirely possible we could have a falling-out and find it difficult to get along on a professional level. Were that to happen, I hoped he would temporarily dismiss me and let me live off my savings or help out with the jewelry business on the side. If not, I figured I could always pick up a part-time job at a convenience store or land an interpreter gig. I could even try being a karate instructor for a bit. Karate was big in Sri Lanka. Now that I could get by in Sinhalese, that wasn't too ridiculous of an idea. Then, once the argument simmered down, I could approach Richard about rehiring me.

I had thought the idea through, I told Richard and Saul with pride. I was daring them to lob objections at me, because I had already made up my mind: I was going to work for Richard, and that was that. Defiance could make people strong.

Saul stroked his luxurious moustache and threw his pupil a long glance. "And there you have it, Richard."

Richard, as the central figure of this discussion, was being bombarded by balls of information bouncing off the wall of Saul the intermediary. Curious to see how he was taking it, I turned my head back over my shoulder. I'd have thought that Richard would be looking at me, but the beautiful man was turned in the other direction altogether. He muttered something, and I only caught the final "trouble for me."

"Hm? What was that?"

"I said, that would not pose any trouble for me."

"That's hardly an answer. Should we take it to mean a reluctant yes? Then say so, my goodness! Seigi is just as eager to know."

"Yes. You may consider my answer an *enthusiastic* yes."

"Well, you heard the man, Seigi."

I cheered and jumped for joy. Richard commented that all my time around Jiro and Saburo was turning me into a dog. But I didn't care. I was thrilled. It felt like God was telling me that the job was set in stone. After the longest period in my life wondering what I wanted for myself, I finally realized that this was my only option. And it had all paid off. *Thank goodness.*

This also solved the thorny issue of who would gain custody of Jiro and Saburo. Sure, it may not have been the most important thing in the world, but it still mattered to me. *Thank goodness for that, too.* Now I only hoped our neighbors, the three-person Yapa family, would still agree to take care of them the next time Richard and I were away.

"...I need to see if Jeffrey will take me in as his apprentice. First things first, I need to learn how to write schedules."

Richard ignored my babbling and asked Saul to do something. "Yes, yes," Saul said and, laughing, retreated to the back room.

I saw a glimpse of the room when he opened the door. The furniture was the same as the last time I'd seen it. Saul closed the door with a heavy thud, at which point Richard turned to me with a furious scowl.

"Why on Earth did you not enlighten me beforehand of such a momentous proposition?"

"I knew you'd tell me to reconsider."

"Well, that's some comfort. You evidently have a *shred* of self-awareness."

"Right. And I had no plans to reconsider, so I didn't tell you."

"...What am I going to do with you?"

I beamed at him. Seigi Nakata was a smart cookie now, and it was all thanks to him.

I had already addressed anything I thought Richard might have been concerned about. If he had any further arguments, I didn't know what they were but had to be ready to handle them all the same. What if he said something like he'd had enough of me and wanted me to leave him alone? I knew I would break down in tears. Not like I could imagine Richard ever saying that, but it was still technically possible.

I continued to grin at Richard's silent glower. "Hey. I'll gladly say it as many times as you need to hear it: I care about you, I want you to be happy, and I'll do anything to support you. Maybe that's my dearest wish right now—let's do away with all the self-sacrifice and recklessness. Let's get rid of these cycles of paying each other back and worrying about who owes what. Or not! Even if life with

you includes all that, that's fine. I still want to spend the rest of my life with you. Maybe I'll wear a lot of different hats along the way. Your personal secretary, your fellow jeweler, even your bodyguard—that's fine. In the end, it would make me happy to fill all those roles for you."

Richard was silent.

"Richard Ranasinghe de Vulpian, would you make me the happiest man in the world?"

As an afterthought, I added that I had already talked this through with my parents.

The silence that followed made my ears ring. No doubt Saul was listening in from the next room over. We would surely have heard him moving around, otherwise.

Richard sighed quietly, then looked right at me and asked, "What is the projected term?"

"For what?"

"I am asking for how long I would contract you as my personal secretary, Seigi."

"Oh, uh…ten years, give or take?"

"Don't be absurd. That is far too long."

"No, no, wait. Ten years will be over before we know it. That's no time at all."

"In 'no time at all,' you shall be thirty-five and I shall be standing on the cusp of fifty. And yet you would still wish—"

"To be with you? Yeah."

Richard went quiet. After a pause, he glanced up at me like a thought had just occurred to him. His face was so stunningly beautiful, so icy cold, that for a moment I felt taken aback.

"Ten years, you say? And what if, in that ten-year interim, I should develop a steady relationship with someone? What if I were to get married?"

"Uh… I could get a babysitter certification?"

"May I please punch you?"

"It was a joke! I'm just messing with you."

Although if he were to get married—well, I knew I'd figure it out somehow. Besides, even clueless ol' me knew that probably wasn't going to happen.

All things considered, it didn't seem like I was making time for Richard. I was demanding *his* time. But how else was I supposed to make Richard as happy as I possibly could?

I smiled weakly, daring him to issue another rebuttal, to which this beautiful man grumbled before gifting me one of his usual smiles. I loved Richard's smiles. They were beautiful, pretty, all the usual adjectives—but more than that, they calmed me. For some reason, that sense of calm had become my favorite feeling as of late.

"...How ever am I going to explain this?"

"Explain what?"

"The next time I travel to the United States, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Nigeria—all my usual haunts—how will I explain to my associates precisely what you're doing there?"

"What's wrong with saying I'm your personal secretary?"

"We don't really have those in this line of work."

So I'd been told. But if not a personal secretary, then what?

Richard looked away and, after a long sigh, relented with "For the present, I suppose I could introduce you as my dear partner."

"Sounds good to me, boss! I'm happy to be your partner in everything. Not just business!"

"Evidently so. Good lord, ten years is far too long. What if we renew your contract on a yearly basis instead?"

"That sounds like a lot of work."

"One year."

"Three?"

"Let's go with two."

Woo-hoo! I pumped my fist. "Perfect! Two years, schmoo years—I don't care, anything works for me! Thanks, Richard. I'll work hard, so give me all the ridiculous jobs you can come up with. Lay 'em on me!"

“Well, on that note… Saul! We’re quite finished.”

“Oh, don’t mind *me*. Keep talking. I’m learning all sorts of weaknesses to exploit over here.”

“Ice water. It’s terrible for the body. There, that’s my weakness for you.”

“You’ve developed a horrible sense of cheek. Oh well, I suppose it’s a bit late to be gathering weaknesses, as it is.”

Richard turned his back on Saul, whose fine mustache quivered with laughter, and faced me. “Seigi?”

“Y-yes?”

“Let us shake on it.”

“Okay.”

I smiled and stuck out my right hand. Richard did the same. I took his slender hand in mine and squeezed it tightly. *I look forward to working with you,* I thought. *Very, very much so.* I wanted to hold his hand forever. I didn’t want to let go.

But we did finally break apart. Richard’s expression was prim and proper. “It is a pleasure to continue working with you, Seigi Nakata.”

“The pleasure is all mine. I hope we can be together forever.”

“Aherm.”

“Oh?” said Saul. “What was that, Richard?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

From there, the conversation turned to reflecting on old times. Everything in Étranger was just as I’d left it. The glass table was as spotless as it had ever been. I would invite Vince here one of these days, and I couldn’t wait to show him that table and watch him grimace. Ms. Darling had outdone herself designing a birthday ring for his and Marian’s first child. The order for the mold had already been placed; I was confident it would be done in time. Henry and Octavia had chipped in to expand Vince’s budget, but we hadn’t told Vince yet.

Then after that… And after that… Oh, there were so many exciting things to look forward to.

Richard smiled as he took a seat on the red couch. “My goodness. The day you walked in here, I certainly never expected that I would ever be dealing with you for so long.”

“Me neither. Oh, I should go make some more tea.”

“If you would be so kind.”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Richard smiled at my dorky tone of voice, and I went to the kitchen—funny how everything seemed so upscale after my time in Sri Lanka—added the tea leaves to the pot, boiled the water, poured in the milk that Saul bought at the instant it reached a roiling boil, topped it off with Richard’s precise amount of sugar, and mixed it together. Ta-da: royal milk tea.

It had surprised me when I found out this beverage originated in Japan. It tasted just like *krithe*, the drink I had grown fond of in Sri Lanka. But *krithe* felt more like an instant beverage—just add hot water over the fine *krithe* powder. Richard’s favorite drink was *royal* milk tea, although I had no idea what made it royal. Apparently, it got that name in Japan for a complicated series of marketing reasons. In that sense, it felt like a jewel with a rich and fascinating history.

Like a certain someone I loved dearly.

I carried a tray with three mugs into the main room, and—

“Seigi, let me once again congratulate you on your diploma. What a remarkable achievement.”

“Surprise! As your boss, let me extend my sincerest congratulations.”

Two crackers fired off with a bang. Driven by a certain someone’s teachings, I rushed to cover the royal milk tea from drifting streamers and confetti, completely missing the point in the process: This was a celebration. For me. These two very busy people had set this all up to celebrate me.

“...Thank you.”

“But of course. It is a pleasure to continue working with you, Seigi.”

“Thank you, Saul! Likewise.”

“Ah, my apologies. I believe the rather comely gentlemen you were seeking a job from just said that.”

“Enough,” Richard snapped. He looked kind of put out, so I wondered if I should do the whole “pleasure to work with you” song and dance one more time for him. Heck, I was happy to do it as many times as he wanted. I would have done it as many times as he would let me.

Richard raised his cup lightly and, in a melodious tone, said, “Cheers.”

A toast with royal milk tea. If that wasn’t the epitome of Étranger, what was? I followed suit and raised my mug, which made Saul do the same with a good-natured exasperated smile.

We shared a cheers before taking a sip of our tea.

Just as I’d done a thousand times before, I wondered what the future I was racing off into had in store for me.



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