

## Too Much Good

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## Too Much Good

by [jenatwork](#)

### Summary

What if Seigi didn't yeet the rock?

Fake marriage AU, in which Richard and Seigi go ahead with the fake civil partnership in order to inherit the Claremont diamond.

### Notes

Here I am again, back on my multi-chapter au bullshit. I did not want to write this story. But I kept thinking about this story, and specific scenes kept writing themselves in my head, until I caved in and actually wrote the story.

Anime-only fans, be aware that this will make reference to things from the novels. Not major spoilers, since this starts out during v4/ep10 and veers wildly away from canon from then on. But things like character names, and minor events like Richard beating up a cushion out of frustration over Seigi's careless compliments.

Also, be sure to read 'A Marriage Of Convenience' by RiyaB1999, which is also based on the same prompt of Richard and Seigi going ahead with the fake marriage.



# Chapter 1

Sometimes, in his more maudlin moments, Richard imagines his life as a novel. It provides a sort of masochistic amusement to wonder whether he is the lead character in some melodramatic tragedy, or a side character in someone else's story.

As the car speeds them away from the city and back to Claremont Hall, Richard pictures the moment as the closing of a chapter, the protagonist captured and led away to some yet-to-be-revealed horror. Is he nearing the end of the story, he wonders, or is this still the beginning?

He recognises the occasional landmark: churches, wind farms, even though it has been years since he was last driven there in one of the family cars. When was it last? An end of term holiday from Cambridge? Certainly, it was in the pre-Deborah days when Claremont Hall still felt like a home of sorts, and he didn't feel so bad about being in the back of a Rolls Royce.

The journey is at once familiar and all wrong. Seigi should not be sitting in the same car as his cousins, drinking champagne and discussing marriage plans. There is something almost dream-like about it, all the wrong people in all the wrong places while Henry smiles like a threadbare ghost of his former self.

Richard can barely bring himself to look at his eldest cousin. Jeffrey clearly wasn't exaggerating when he talked about how ill Henry had grown. He looks like he hasn't seen sunlight in years. Why hadn't Godfrey said anything when they'd spoken? Yet he still manages to smile, as though by bringing Seigi into the whole sordid family mess, Jeffrey has somehow made his world bright again.

Seigi is in England. How many times over the past month has he indulged in that nasty little fantasy? Sitting in the café that has become his regular mid-morning spot, hearing the bell ring over the door, and looking up to see Seigi standing there. Saying, *'I found you'*, and smiling that sunshine smile that makes Richard's heart hurt.

Except it's Deborah all over again. Seigi is here because of Jeffrey and that damn diamond. He doesn't want to believe that his Hero of Justice would go along with Jeffrey's proposed fraud. But Seigi is a student who has to work part-time to afford to live in a tiny apartment in a low-income neighbourhood, and a multi-million pound diamond is enough to persuade even the most virtuous hero.

Claremont Hall hasn't changed. The hedges are as neat as always, the gravel still crunches under the car's wheels as they pull up to the entrance, and Richard even recognises the man waiting to open the car doors, although he seems smaller and greyer after so many years. He hopes that there might be time to pause a moment inside; Seigi is still recovering from his fever, and Richard is sorely in need of a cup of tea. But Jeffrey has called ahead, and everything is ready for them to view the diamond.

His head feels fuzzy as they climb the stairs. How many times did he sit on these stairs waiting for his mother to visit? How often did he act as look-out while Jeffrey slid down the banister in defiance of his father's rule? The height of them is dizzying, or maybe he has caught some bug from Seigi; is that why his hand feels so warm and clammy?

It takes a moment to realise that it is Seigi's hand. Seigi's hand holding his, fingers warm around Richard's palm. His head reels even more. Is Seigi putting on some show for Jeffrey's sake, or is this the reunion gesture Richard's imagination has been torturing him with? But then Seigi's

fingers twist and press, and he realises Seigi is trying to give him something. He pockets the paper, wishing they had more time - if he could have just five minutes alone with Seigi, they could talk properly, and he could find out what the hell has happened to make Seigi think that siding with Jeffrey and forcing Richard into the very thing he's been running from for years is a good idea.

But they are already at the top of the stairs, heading to the room with that damn diamond, and Richard feels like he has been caught in some awful lie and is being marched to his father's study to face the consequences.

It's just the two of them and Mr Garrett, the trustee, in the room, although Richard knows there is a security team lurking somewhere just outside. He's surprised Jeffrey hasn't tried to worm his way in for the viewing. Maybe Jeffrey's seen it. Maybe he's talked Garrett into letting him have a sneak peek every now and then so he can think up ways to talk Richard into coming back to claim it. Richard and Seigi sit at one side of a low table, and he tries not to think of those beautiful red chairs in his shop in Ginza, of sitting there to drink tea with Seigi in between customers. They watch Garrett take his time opening up the hidden safe and taking out the stupid little locked box on its stupid tray, as though the box is just as impressive as what's inside. He doesn't want to look at it; a lump of granite would be more appealing. But this is mostly for Seigi's sake, so that he can see what all the fuss is about. So he watches Seigi instead, and sees the sparkle in his eyes, the shine of his hair, the cut of his jawline, and knows that all the diamonds in the world cannot compare to the memory of Seigi telling him, *I like you*.

There's a moment where Seigi's arm twitches, as though he is about to reach out and grab the diamond. But Garrett pulls the box back, well out of reach, and asks Seigi what he thinks of it. Seigi's mouth opens and closes a couple of times, before he slumps back in his chair.

"Lost for words?" asks Garrett, and it's easy to see why he might think that. But Richard has known Seigi long enough to know that if his mouth isn't running faster than his mind, then something isn't right.

"As soon as your partnership is official, we can begin the transfer of ownership," says Garrett. "Of course, we can continue to hold it here for as long as you wish, sir. As you've seen, the security here is impeccable." He can only nod, and try to contemplate the paradox of the diamond sitting in a locked box in a locked safe in a locked room. If a diamond cannot shine, is it any better than coal?

One of the staff comes to escort them both down the hall. Richard doesn't recognise her, but she has the sort of poise and confidence that make Richard think 'housekeeper'. His hunch is confirmed when she produces a bunch of keys to open up a very familiar room.

"We had your room prepared for you, sir, since Master Jeffrey called ahead and told us you'd be staying a while. We'll have the young man's luggage sent up. Do you have anything with you, sir?"

For a moment, Richard is too overcome to answer; the sight of his childhood bedroom, unchanged after so many years, makes something twist uncomfortably inside him. It's only when Seigi looks at him in confusion that he realises he needs to answer.

"My things are in my hotel room," he manages, not quite looking at her. "I will have to collect them tomorrow."

"Very good, sir." She heads back down the hall. Richard gestures for Seigi to go inside, then follows him in and closes the door. The snick of the latch is like an off-switch, and he feels his shoulders sag as he is finally, finally alone with Seigi.

Seigi hovers by the door, eyes wide as he looks around the room.

“I can’t get over how fancy this place is,” he says, and Richard sees then the Seigi he knew back in Tokyo, impressed by anything new and ready to voice his feelings without any sort of forethought. “Whose room is this?”

Richard realises belatedly that he might not have understood anything the housekeeper said, or anything Garrett said, for that matter.

“This was my room.” He crosses to the window, and drops down on to the chaise longue. The bed is calling to him, but if he sits there, it will be like admitting that he really is staying.

“What, always? Even when you were a child?” It’s clear that Seigi wants to explore; his fingers twitch like he wants to touch everything, but Richard understands his reticence in the face of such extravagance. “It’s hard to imagine a little kid playing in a room like this.”

Seigi is right; it’s an entirely unsuitable room for a small child. He can’t recall many especially fond memories of the room. Even his memories of sneaking into Jeffrey’s room when he couldn’t sleep now bear the sting of betrayal. And here he is again, trying to get to grips with the possibility that Seigi, of all people, is willing to sell him out for the diamond.

He aches, all the way to his bones. The fantasy he has tormented himself with, of Seigi tracking him down in London and pleading with him to come home, has twisted around itself and become this venomous nightmare in which Seigi turns up, not to find him, but to find the very thing Richard has tried to keep hidden.

Richard pinches the bridge of his nose, as if that might somehow close off the flurry of questions running through his mind, but they keep coming. How did Jeffrey find Seigi? Why is Seigi so willing to go along with him? And why the hell does Jeffrey think that he and Seigi are a couple?

When he looks up, he realises Seigi still hasn’t moved very far from the door. Apparently having become used to the room’s opulence, he is hovering, fidgeting with the strap of that ridiculous little bag over his chest. Richard can’t decide whether he wants to hold him or slap him. But he cannot even summon the energy to be angry anymore, so instead he tells Seigi to sit down.

There’s a chair by the desk; Richard remembers, suddenly, sitting in that chair as a child, practising his kana in a notebook on the desk. Writing his name, and Jeffrey’s name and Henry’s name, until he could do them all as quickly and as neatly as he could in English, to show to Chieko. Seigi lifts the chair and turns it so that he can sit facing Richard.

“I’m so sorry,” Seigi tells him at last, still worrying at his bag. “I’ve caused you so much trouble. This wasn’t how I meant for things to go.”

He sounds genuine. There is more reason to believe that he honestly regrets how things have turned out than to believe that Seigi is really in cahoots with his cousin to make a fortune.

“Start from the beginning,” Richard says. “Explain to me how you and Jeffrey found each other. Why he seems to think that you and I are dating. And what you thought was going to happen when you got here.”

He already knows a little of Seigi’s story, but he listens as Seigi tells it again, much more lucid this time. About setting out on his own with an economy ticket to Heathrow, but finding himself mysteriously bumped up to business class when he transferred in Vietnam. Meeting Jeffrey, and hearing his side of the story, about how the inheritance had made his brother gravely ill. How

Jeffrey had asked, partway through the flight, how far his ‘relationship’ with Richard had gone, leaving Seigi too stunned to correct him. And then, recovering from his fever in a hotel room, meeting Henry, seeing firsthand how bad he was, and being overcome with an urge to help.

He pauses there, and Richard is hit with an urge of his own, to reach out and take Seigi’s hand. He resists it, because he still feels the faint sting of anger. But that is Seigi: rushing in head first to help a stranger with no thought for consequences. If that wasn’t in his nature, then Richard might never have met him at all, and he cannot scold Seigi for his generosity. But to be the focus, the recipient of all that *goodness*, is overwhelming, Richard knows. There are other people more deserving of it. Besides, allowing Seigi to help him is an admission that he needs help in the first place, and Richard has spent too long convincing himself that he is self-reliant to allow for a crack in that wall.

“But,” Seigi says, when he picks up again, “when we were in the car, and Jeffrey said it might mean moving things forward quickly for us, you didn’t correct him either.”

Richard curses Seigi’s perception. He can easily say he was caught off-guard too. It wouldn’t be his first white lie to Seigi. But Richard is well aware of that treacherous little spark inside of him that flares up every time someone makes the same mistake about the two of them. Wasn’t it diamonds, too, the first time someone mistook them for a couple? And yet Richard never corrects anyone. Partly because Seigi has never caught on before now, but partly, too, because it fans that little flame of hope, the one that has him imagining the two of them together for real.

“I was distracted,” he says instead. “Today’s the first time I’ve seen Henry in several years. I have to admit-” He draws a long breath, and looks down. “I too was taken aback by how much his health has deteriorated.

“So you understand why I couldn’t ignore him when he asked for help?” Seigi’s eyes are wide, pleading, and Richard feels his own face soften.

“Seigi, you would help a starving tiger without thinking twice about whether it meant to eat you, and that is why-” He catches himself, bites off the thought, and shakes it off. “That is why I cannot bring myself to stay angry with you. But there are consequences to every action, and now we must decide how to deal with them.”

There’s a knock at the door before he can go any further. He wants to ignore it, or tell whoever’s there to come back later. But the door opens before he can say anything, which means it can only be one person.

“They’re about to serve dinner downstairs,” Jeffrey says, sticking his head around the open door. Richard catches the way his cousin looks between the two of them; Jeffrey is perceptive enough to know that he’s interrupted something, but that doesn’t stop him from opening the door fully and stepping in. “I’m sure you’re both ready to eat. It’s been a long day. I asked the staff if they’d put dinner on a little early, since Harry will probably want to go to bed early after the drive.”

Before Richard can tell him to leave them alone, his stomach reminds him that he has missed lunch. Seigi, too. And eating means he can think for a while without being obligated to speak.

He tells Jeffrey they’ll be along shortly, which thankfully is enough to make Jeffrey leave the room. The door remains open, however, meaning he cannot carry on their conversation. Instead, Richard lets out a long breath, before pushing himself to his feet.

“Let’s go eat,” he tells Seigi. “We’ll talk some more after dinner.” He makes Seigi leave his jacket and bag in the room, and then leads the way to the dining room.

There are four places set, and they sit down next to each other. Briefly, he wonders where his aunt and uncle are, before deciding that things will be easier with fewer people at the table. As they wait for the others, Richard tells Seigi, "It would be for the best if you say as little as possible over dinner. Talk about your studies if you must, but be wary of Jeffrey. Don't volunteer any other information about yourself. I will answer for you, if it becomes necessary." It's harsh, but he has to find some way to get them both untangled from this dreadful mess, and that will be harder if Jeffrey tries to push Seigi for details about their supposed 'relationship'.

The table is set for multiple courses, and Richard wishes he'd asked for something to be sent to his room instead, or that he had thought to pinch the keys to one of the cars to take Seigi out somewhere to eat. Seigi asks something about the cutlery, but Jeffrey and Henry arrive before he can answer, and once again he's struck by Henry's frailty. It's a slow walk for him across the room, and Jeffrey pulls out the chair for him, but he's still smiling when he sits down. To Richard's surprise, he manages a well-pronounced "Konbanwa," to Seigi, who blinks a few times before answering, "Good evening."

The staff arrive as soon as everyone is seated, bringing out bowls of soup and a plate of bread rolls. Richard pours water for Seigi, then for Henry and himself, setting the jug down just slightly beyond Jeffrey's reach. It's petty, but he's still barely managing to restrain himself from wringing Jeffrey's neck, so the man ought to be thankful Richard has deigned to be in the same room as him for an entire meal. He notices Seigi watching him to see which spoon to pick up, and he smiles when he hears Seigi whisper a quick "Itadakimasu" before diving in.

"What's it like to be back in your old room?" Jeffrey asks him, in English. Richard wants to scold him for being rude to Seigi, but Seigi is too preoccupied with his food for now to realise he's been left out of the conversation.

"I don't intend to stay more than one night," he answers. "I have a hotel room - I shall return there tomorrow." He wipes the back of his soup spoon on his bread and takes a mouthful. It's surprisingly good, and he realises just how hungry he is. Perhaps he can ask to take his main course back up to his room, so he can enjoy the food in peace.

"Nonsense!" Jeffrey says with a wave of his hand. "No point paying for a hotel in the city when you've got a room here for free. Besides, there's a lot of planning to do, and it'll be easier if we all work from here to get it done quicker."

"We shall see about that." He focuses on his food, only acknowledging Seigi when he exclaims how good the warm bread rolls are. Almost as soon as they're all done, the staff return to clear the bowls and replace them with their main course.

"The kitchen staff weren't expecting all of us, so they couldn't prepare much," Jeffrey says, in Japanese this time, as though a three-course meal is somehow an embarrassment. "But Cook always has a few pies in the kitchen for unexpected guests. Seigi, I hope you like steak and kidney pudding!"

Predictably, Seigi looks confused by the word 'pudding', until his plate is set before him and he sees the suet pastry on his plate.

"Uh, I've never had it before," he says, fumbling with his knife and fork, "but I'm sure it will be good." He slices it open, surprised when the gravy pours out. Richard starts on his own meal, trying to ignore his cousins and their fascination with Seigi's first savoury pudding. He starts with vegetables; pastry after bread will likely sit too heavy on his stomach, and he doesn't want to make himself ill, on top of everything else.

A few bites in, Henry asks Jeffrey to ask Seigi what he does in Japan, and they spend a few minutes translating back and forth about Seigi's university courses, as Richard pretends to be more interested in his meal. Then Jeffrey decides to change the subject.

"Hey, Seigi," he says, leaning his elbow on the table, "Henry wanted to know how you two met. Why don't you tell us?"

Seigi looks to Richard, who nods to let him know it's okay. Whether they choose to drop the deception or not, that particular story shouldn't hurt them. And whatever else, he cannot bring himself to be rude to Henry.

So he listens to Seigi tell the story about how he was walking home, late one evening, and saw a group of drunks hassling someone, and called out as if there were police nearby. When Jeffrey turns and translates the part where Seigi says, "Right away, I was struck by how beautiful he was," there's no ignoring the way Henry's face lights up.

Richard purses his lips, and wonders what it will take to make Seigi drop those careless compliments. Does he say such things to his friends? He certainly isn't embarrassed about saying them in front of customers. And yet he seems so oblivious still, to how people mistake them for a couple, and to how his words tear at Richard's poor, poor heart.

He picks at his food. He was ravenous when he sat down, but the suet pastry is stodgier than he's grown accustomed to, and he can't bear to eat any more. There's cutlery laid out for dessert, and he hasn't had anything sweet for a couple of days, but he's not sure he can manage another bite.

Seigi continues his story, about the ring, and meeting its original owner in Kobe, and for a moment Richard wonders if the revelation of Seigi's grandmother's pick-pocketing days will give Jeffrey second thoughts. But there have been worse things done in the name of survival, and far worse things done by Claremonts of past generations, and all Jeffrey says is that Seigi's family can rest assured that their civil partnership will guarantee them financial stability.

He finishes by explaining how Richard offered him a job at Jewellery Etranger, and Jeffrey turns to Richard with a comment about workplace romances that Richard cuts off with a raised hand.

"I am more than capable of being professional in my workplace," he snaps, which is another lie to add to the list. There is a very worn-out cushion in his office which is testament to how fragile his workplace professionalism is at times. When Seigi looks to him for a translation, he shakes his head to tell him, *you don't need to know*.

Their plates are cleared, and Richard decides he's about ready to leave the table, when Jeffrey tells Seigi, "There's treacle sponge and custard for dessert. That was one of Ricky's favourites when he was little."

Seigi's eyes grow wide, and he tells Jeffrey he's excited to see the sort of English sweets Richard likes. Before Richard can stop him, Seigi begins talking about the food cupboard at the shop, and how he enjoys making pudding for Richard even though it's not nearly as fancy as the stuff he buys from Shiseido Parlour. Again, it's no lie, and won't hurt them if they come clean. But Seigi, as always, is blissfully ignorant of the effect of his words, and how he manages to convince everyone that his feelings for his employer are so much more than mere respect or admiration.

Forced to sit through a third course, Richard tries to enjoy his food, but Jeffrey once again finds a way to sour things.

"I've made a start on arrangements for the civil partnership," he announces, just as Richard takes a



bite of his pudding. "We can have everything taken care of within three days."

"As soon as that?" Seigi says, as Richard struggles to swallow his food. Richard holds up a hand to keep him from saying anything else.

"We haven't made a decision yet," he says. Jeffrey does not translate this for Henry's benefit, although Richard's tone is enough to make him look concerned.

Jeffrey sets down his spoon and leans forward a little across the table.

"Look, Ricky. I realise you and Seigi probably want a little time together to talk all this over. Why don't we reconvene tomorrow? Over breakfast. Or brunch, if you need more time." He cocks his head, a smug I-know-you-so-well look on his face that Richard wants to punch. But he can't reasonably argue with that, so he says nothing; just nods at Seigi, who nods back. Evidently pleased with himself, Jeffrey turns to Henry to tell him, "We're going to finalise everything over brunch tomorrow. Give these two chance to relax a bit and talk things through."

Henry's smile might not be the thing that causes Richard to fold, but it certainly adds a crack to his defenses. For a moment, Richard understands why Seigi wants to help.

He pushes his bowl away, even though he is barely halfway done with his dessert.

"I think I am done for today. Please excuse us," he says, wiping his hands on his napkin before standing up. Without hesitation, Seigi stands too, and the two of them walk away from the table, although Richard catches Seigi giving a quick bow of his head and a habitual "Gochisousama deshita," and he is thankful that Jeffrey and Henry don't see his own proud smile as he leaves the room.

Back in his room, Richard closes the door, and lets out a sigh that feels like it's been held in for days.

"The food was good," Seigi says, most likely wanting to make conversation that isn't likely to upset him. "What was the dessert called again? Tea-something?"

"Treacle sponge," he answers, crossing the room to the chaise longue. "Treacle is a sugar syrup."

"I'd like to learn how to make it."

Seigi's backpack has been brought up to the room while they've been downstairs: it leans against the edge of the bed. On top of the covers, there are two piles of towels, and two pairs of Richard's old pyjamas. He didn't take many things when he left, and Claremonts rarely throw anything away, so of course his old clothes are still here. Strange how buying high-priced things allows one to be frugal, he thinks. Looking at the two piles, he realises, possibly for the first time, that he and Seigi will be sharing the room for the night. Because everyone assumes they are a couple. Because they still haven't corrected Jeffrey's assumption.

He is suddenly aware of the dryness of his mouth, the thickness of his tongue. Seigi, oblivious, goes to retrieve his bag, checking his phone.

"Shall I show you where the bathroom is?" Richard asks him. He needs a moment to himself, to try to make sense of everything that has happened in the past couple of days, and there is no other reasonable way to get Seigi out of the room. Thankfully, Seigi nods, putting his phone away before grabbing one of the stacks of towels.

In the bathroom, he explains how to work the ancient taps to get the water to an acceptable

temperature, and gives Seigi time to marvel at the shower being over the bath itself. He tells Seigi to take his time, and to run himself a bath afterwards if he wants to soak, and once Seigi has found the guest soaps and shampoos, Richard leaves him to it.

Back in his own room, he sits on the chaise and succumbs to an old habit of biting the edge of his thumb as he weighs up his options.

One: they come clean to Jeffrey and Henry. Explain that they are not a couple, but are simply employer and employee. Call off the civil partnership, allow the diamond to be bequeathed to charity, and return to Tokyo, leaving the Claremonts to carry on without them.

Two: they leave in the middle of the night, walk into the village and call a taxi to take them to the airport, where Richard can put Seigi on a flight back home and then either follow him back to Ginza or pick a new destination and start over again.

Three: they go ahead with Jeffrey's civil partnership plan. Sign the papers, say the vows, pretend to be a couple for a few months until Jeffrey comes up with the money to compensate him and Seigi, and then arrange a quiet separation, Seigi goes back to Tokyo, and Richard...what? Finds another country to run to? Starts his life over yet again, with his heart broken a second time? How much of it will even be left?

Options one and two would mean truly severing all his ties with his family. Not to mention what it would do to Henry. But option three - Richard doesn't know if he can survive having to spend six months living such a warped version of his deepest desire.

Perhaps sleeping on it might help. He stands and slips off his jacket, meaning to change into pyjamas while he has some privacy. Out of habit, he checks his pockets to make sure nothing important is left there, and pulls out a slip of paper. The one Seigi had given him as they'd climbed the stairs earlier. It's crinkled, from the way Seigi had pressed it into his hand, and Richard wonders if he was meant to have read it earlier.

He opens it, and reads the first few lines, and frowns.

When Seigi returns to the room, Richard is still looking at the paper. He's changed into his own pyjamas, and his clothes are hanging on the outside of the wardrobe; if he puts them away, it will be like admitting that he plans to stay, and he will not do that. Richard holds up the paper, intending to ask Seigi what on earth it is supposed to mean, when his words catch in his own throat.

Seigi's hair is damp and shower-mussed, and his feet are bare. Both these things would usually be enough to send Richard running for that beaten-up cushion in his office. But Seigi is also wearing a pair of his own old pyjamas. Rich, deep blue cotton, with light blue piping at the cuffs and collar. A little snug, where Seigi is broader across the chest than he has ever been.

"I assume these were put out for me?" he asks, tugging at the collar. "I usually sleep in a T-shirt and underwear, but I figured that might not be appropriate?"

Richard's brain gives up entirely. It takes several seconds before he manages to tell Seigi to make himself comfortable, before he snatches up his own towels and pyjamas and makes a hasty exit from the room.

He usually prefers to shower in the morning; it helps him to wake up, and makes it easier to deal with bed-head if he's been tossing and turning during the night. But there's little chance of him sleeping tonight, not with Seigi in the same room, so what does it matter if an evening shower

makes him too awake? The pipes still creak, and the water pressure is still too weak, and the water not quite hot enough, but he stays under the shower as long as he can stand, giving in to terrible thoughts about Seigi in his pyjamas, Seigi in his bedroom, Seigi asleep next to him.

Would it be so bad, to pretend for a few months? To let Jeffrey and Henry and the rest of them have the damn diamond, so he can leave them all behind for good? He doesn't need the money, but the payout would mean he could pick any country he wants to start over again. He could buy a house in Sri Lanka, work directly with Saul. Switzerland might be nice, and Schweizerdeutsch could be an interesting challenge. Or maybe the Netherlands. The world is his oyster, and what is one diamond when there are so many pearls to choose from?

Richard takes his time combing his hair, brushing his teeth, doing almost everything it's possible to do in a bathroom until there is nothing left but to go back to his room. He finds Seigi peeling the thin bedspread off the bed, with a pillow already placed on the chaise longue.

"What are you doing?" It comes out harsher than he means it to, but he can't take it back.

"I was going to sleep on the couch," Seigi explains. "I can't kick you out of your own bed."

Richard takes the pillow and puts it back at the head of the bed.

"That thing was not made for sleeping on. Trust me." With his back to Seigi, he says what he knows he will regret. "The bed is big enough for two. Besides, you are still recovering from an illness. You need a good night's sleep."

He has to bite his tongue to keep his face even as he shakes out the bedspread and lays it back over the sheets. Seigi goes to the other side of the bed to help, tugging it so it lays flat. He keeps his head down as he works, and Richard wonders if he ought to find another room for the night. The house has plenty, after all, and he can always tell Jeffrey and Henry that they haven't reached the bed-sharing point of their 'relationship'. It wouldn't be a lie, and they shouldn't judge him too harshly if he says it would be moving a little too fast.

But then Seigi climbs on to the bed and slips his feet under the covers, and Richard sees him, sitting up against the pillows, with Richard's old blue pyjamas, and his breath catches in his throat. Depending on what happens in the morning, this could possibly be the last time he gets to spend with Seigi alone, and Richard may be a romantic fool but he is not an idiot.

Reluctant to get into bed just yet, Richard goes over to the desk, remembering the paper from his pocket. He picks it up, and turns to Seigi, holding it up.

"Now," he begins, taking a seat on the foot of the bed, "perhaps you can explain to me why you smuggled a pudding recipe into my hand earlier."

Seigi looks surprised, as though he had forgotten it entirely. He leans forward, pushing the bed covers aside and making grabby hands as if to take the paper back.

"You can throw it away! It's nothing, really. Just something stupid."

"It is not 'nothing'." Richard pulls his hand back so Seigi cannot reach it. "You must have meant something by it."

Defeated, Seigi slumps back against the headboard. He plucks at the bedspread, and Richard generously gives him time to get his thoughts in order.

"It was so that you could have someone to make you pudding the way you like it, if I wasn't

around to do it for you anymore.”

“Not around? Seigi, what do you mean?” He watches Seigi’s mouth twist, as though he doesn’t want to say any more. “Earlier, you said this was ‘not how you meant things to go’. Seigi, what exactly were you planning to do?”

The bedspread wrinkles around his twisting fingers. Richard waits.

“I was going to break the diamond.”

Richard looks down at the paper, trying to process the link between the diamond and pudding.

“What?”

“You told me once,” Seigi says, still not looking at him, “that diamonds can shatter with enough directional force. I thought that if I could throw it and break it, then the whole inheritance thing wouldn’t matter anymore.”

Richard has to restrain himself from creasing the paper into a mess. His fingers want to tighten into a fist, and he has to turn away and put the paper back into the pocket of his jacket, just to keep himself from destroying it.

“A diamond worth millions of pounds - billions of yen - and you were willing to destroy it?”

“If it meant you wouldn’t have to be forced into a marriage you didn’t want, then yes.”

“And what did you assume would happen to you after shattering a multi-million pound heirloom?”

“I was prepared to accept the consequences, whatever they might have been.”

“Prepared to accept - ”

He has to stand up again, and turn away from Seigi for a moment, to collect himself. He runs a hand through his hair, and draws in a long breath through his nose, before deciding he can speak again at a reasonable volume.

“Seigi. The consequences, if you had done such a thing, might have been arrest, imprisonment, possibly a whole international incident. Whatever foolish thoughts you might have had about wanting to help me, I am not worth throwing your whole life away.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “If anyone should shatter that diamond, it should be me. I should have thought of it sooner.”

The way Seigi splutters into laughter is enough to soften Richard’s anger a little, just enough for him to go back and sit on the edge of the bed by the pillows. He is not yet ready to get *into* the bed next to Seigi, not quite yet, but this is close enough.

“Seigi, I am not angry with you for planning to break the diamond. If anything, it pleases me that you remembered something I taught you well enough to use it, or plan to use it.” He puts his hand flat on the bedspread, perhaps a foot away from where Seigi’s hand is. “I am angry because you show so little concern for your own well-being. Your generosity and your kind heart are wonderful things, but they should not come at the cost of your own safety. And what would have happened after you’d been arrested, and taken away? What would I have done then?”

Seigi’s smile fades, and his face pinches in a way that Richard does not like at all. He looks back down at the bedspread, at the space between their hands.

“I wanted you to have your freedom,” he whispers, his voice tight like he’s holding something back. Richard aches with the desire to reach out and hold him. But they are in Richard’s bed, in soft pyjamas with clean skin and bare feet, and nothing good will come of putting his hands on Seigi under such circumstances.

“Did you think I could have walked away and continued my life, knowing that you were locked up somewhere? Did you think I would have found someone else to work in my shop? Did you write out that recipe thinking that someone else could make your pudding, or that I would even deign to eat pudding in my shop if someone else had made it?” He sees the way Seigi’s eyes squeeze shut, and bites down on the urge to reach out for him once again. “And what about your mother? What about your friends? Tanimoto-san?” He hates saying her name, but Seigi needs to hear this. “You mean an awful lot to many people, Seigi, and if you show such disregard for your own well-being, then you disregard their feelings. My feelings. I do not want you to throw your life away, not on my account and not for anyone else. Will you promise me this, Seigi?” Seigi wipes at his eyes with the heel of his hand, not saying anything. “Promise me that you will protect yourself as much as you try to protect others, including me. Because if you don’t - ” He breaks off, not sure how to finish. “If you don’t, then I don’t know what I would do.”

He listens as Seigi draws a long, shuddering breath.

“But I’ve still caused such a mess,” he manages, finally looking up at Richard with red-rimmed eyes. “If I’d gone through with it, then at least it would be over for you. Now, there’s a whole other mess you have to deal with.”

Richard purses his lips. It’s true, they are still caught in an impossible tangle. But it has been a long day, and he is tired.

“There will be time to deal with that in the morning,” he says. He turns to the nightstand, finding a box of tissues; guests are always well looked after at Claremont Hall, and the staff know how to provide. He passes the box to Seigi, who takes one and wipes his eyes, then grabs a second and blows his nose. The sound eases Richard’s anxiety about sharing the bed with him. There is nothing attractive about snot. “You need to sleep. It’s not that long since your fever broke, and you need to rest. We will make our decisions in the morning, preferably with tea and breakfast.”

Seigi manages a weak smile, before he puts the tissues on his own bedside table and squirms down under the covers. Richard gets up to turn off the light, finding his way back to the bed with ancient muscle-memory. He slips under the blankets and adjusts his pillow until he can get comfortable, and they tell each other ‘goodnight’ in the darkness.

Thankfully, Seigi is one of those annoying people who can fall asleep within minutes. It means that Richard does not have to wait long before he can turn on to his side to face him. In the small amount of light seeping in around the edge of the door, Richard can just barely make out the curves of Seigi’s face.

Would it be so bad, to pretend for a few months? His heart has already been broken once, and even now that it feels patched up and knotty with scar tissue, he thinks that maybe, perhaps, if he is careful, he might just survive another break.

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## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

"The deciding point is, which option would cause the least amount of worry for the least amount of people."

It has been several years since Richard last shared a bed with another adult. Contrary to what the films might have one believe, it is not a wonderfully romantic experience. For a restless sleeper, it means not having enough room to turn over, and being constantly aware of how the slightest move might disturb one's bed partner. Thankfully, Seigi does not snore. But it is some time before Richard falls asleep, and later than he'd like when he finally wakes up.

Richard knows that he is not at his best in the morning. As soon as he is properly awake and aware of where he is, he checks his mouth for traces of drool and smooths down his hair where it has tangled against the pillow. But a moment later he realises that he is alone. The sheets have been pulled back on Seigi's side of the bed, and the pillow straightened and smoothed out. His pyjamas have been neatly folded and sit at the foot of the bed, where they'd been laid out the night before.

Suddenly gripped with panic, he scrambles out of the bed, quickly dressing in yesterday's clothes, before heading down the hall. Seigi is not in the bathroom, which means he is off somewhere in the house, without Richard. Getting into goodness knows what kind of trouble. Who knows what else Jeffrey might talk him into without Richard around. Perhaps he should have instructed Seigi to stay in the room, to not go off unaccompanied. But it is too late now.

He finds the housekeeper near the top of the main staircase and ignores any attempt at polite pleasantries to ask her where Seigi is.

"He's in the kitchen, sir," she tells him, "with Master Henry." The knowing look on her face is more than he can stand, and he dashes downstairs without bothering to thank her. The staff already dislike him for abandoning the family and making Henry ill, so one moment of impertinence is hardly going to make things worse. He takes the stairs faster than he should, and almost runs past more staff until he reaches the kitchen. Sure enough, there is Seigi, in fresh clothes and socked feet, minding a milk pan at the stove, while Henry sets cups and saucers on the worktop. Richard stops in the doorway, to catch his breath, inexplicably thankful that Seigi is okay.

Henry sees him first, and gives Richard the same knowing smile as the housekeeper.

"He wanted to make tea for you," says Henry as he places a cup carefully on its matching saucer. Seigi, realising that Richard has finally surfaced, looks up at him and smiles.

"Good morning, Richard," he says, in over-emphasised English. "I am making tea!" He seems unabashedly proud of himself, both for his language skills and his tea-making, and it is only because Jeffrey is not around that Richard allows himself to smile. Seigi's brow creases for a moment, before he switches to Japanese. "I'm sorry it's not your usual tea blend. But I hope it's okay. Henry helped me to find everything."

The milk in the pan begins to bubble up, and Seigi turns off the gas, well versed by now in preparing tea to Richard's taste. There are three cups set out, and Seigi deftly fills each one with milky tea, passing one to Richard, then one to Henry.

The three of them take their cups to the dining room, where the staff have already set out breakfast. For a while, they eat in awkward silence, since Henry and Seigi can't really talk to each other, and Richard can't talk to one without ignoring the other or spending time translating back and forth. Just as the sounds of eating and drinking start to become unbearable, Jeffrey breezes into the room, a document folder tucked under one arm and a smile on his face.

"Cook tells me someone's been busy making tea. Is there any left for me?" he asks, eyeing Henry's cup.

"No. You should have got here earlier." Richard drinks the last of his tea.

"As if you didn't just wake up five minutes ago." Jeffrey finds the coffee pot on the side table and pours himself a cup, which he drinks without cream or sugar. "Some of us have been up for hours, making arrangements for someone else's civil partnership, to save someone else the trouble of doing it himself." He sits down and passes the folder to Richard, before translating a much nicer version of their exchange for Henry's benefit.

Richard gives the papers a cursory once-over, before setting the folder down on the table.

"We still haven't made a decision yet," he says, unsurprised when Jeffrey does not translate that part.

"Come on, Ricky, what's to decide? All that needs to be done is for you and Seigi to register your intent for a civil partnership, then go back to the registry office in a month's time to say 'I do', and then all this is finally over. The diamond stays in the family, we can give you both your share of its value, if you like, and then when a little time has passed, you can arrange for a dissolution order if you need to. If it helps, think of it as a business deal." He turns to Seigi, grabbing a bread roll from the basket and working it open with a knife. "You're on board, aren't you, Nakata-kun?"

Seigi, to his credit, simply says, "It's up to Richard."

"It's not that simple," Richard adds. "Seigi cannot stay here for a month. He has obligations in Tokyo. As do I."

At that, Seigi's face lights up, but Richard holds up a hand, indicating that they will talk about it later.

"And there is the matter of Seigi's family. I assume that Seigi has not told them why he came here, and I doubt they would be happy to find out that their son has eloped."

Jeffrey's smile is looking a little forced, and Henry looks between them, silently asking for an explanation. Jeffrey glances at his brother, before switching to English.

"I'm sure his family will be appeased when he gets his share of the fortune, Ricky."

"And I'm sure that you are doing his family a disservice with your assumptions," he answers, also in English. He gives Seigi an apologetic shake of his head, before resuming in Japanese. "Look. I need to retrieve my belongings from my hotel room. The journey there and back should take no more than four hours on the train. That will give me time to reach a decision."

Jeffrey's face brightens.

“A perfect opportunity for us to show Seigi around the place while you make your mind up!”

Richard curses himself. He had meant for Seigi to go with him, so that, if necessary, he could get Seigi to the airport. But Jeffrey is quicker on the ball than he is, it seems.

Jeffrey repeats himself for Henry’s benefit, and Henry smiles too.

“Please, Richard,” he says, “it would be good to spend some time with Mr Nakata. I’m sure he would like to see the grounds.”

Backed into a corner, Richard has no choice. He explains the proposal to Seigi, who hesitates a moment, before nodding.

“I’ll be okay,” he tells Richard. “And it might be nice to take things easy today.”

Jeffrey insists on having the driver take Richard as far as the train station, refusing to let him call a taxi. When he gets to the station, he tells the driver to go back to the house, insisting that he will call a taxi for the return journey. The driver is reluctant, apparently having been told by Master Jeffrey to wait and bring him back home, so Richard slips him a fifty and tells him to wait four hours, then go back to the house and say he didn’t show.

On the train, he takes out his phone and looks up the procedure for registering a civil partnership. There is no way he can allow Seigi to stay in the country for the full twenty-eight day wait period between registering intent and actually registering the partnership. He wonders if they can hand over the diamond before the twenty-eight days are up, but suspects it would not be so easy. After all, the will seems specifically designed to make it as difficult as possible to take possession of the diamond; it is most likely that it cannot be released until a union is official.

When he gets back to the hotel he’s been using, he takes his time packing up his things. He doesn’t have much; a few changes of clothing, a laptop, and a boxed selection of gems which have been held in the hotel’s safe, which he retrieves at check-out. He stops a while in the foyer, checking his pockets. He has his passport, and a credit card in his wallet, and technically there is nothing at all stopping him from taking the Tube to Heathrow and buying a ticket to wherever takes his fancy. He could leave. Eventually, Jeffrey and Henry would realise he had gone again, and would no doubt help Seigi to get back to Japan. He’s cut ties before, and he could do it again.

His pocket check, however, ends with the scrap of paper with Seigi’s recipe for pudding. He has run away from Seigi before. And Seigi tracked him down and followed him. What would it do to Seigi if he left again? Seigi, who was prepared to throw his whole life away if it gave Richard his freedom?

He slips the pudding recipe into his wallet, puts his wallet into the inside left pocket of his blazer, swears under his breath, and heads out to take the train back to Claremont Hall.

A car he doesn’t recognise is parked outside the front entrance when he returns. He pauses, just for a moment, to admire the Triumph, wondering what Saul would make of it, before realising what it means. He sprints up the drive to the stairs, heedless of the gravel under his smooth-soled shoes, and reaches the main hall with his chest heaving.

The housekeeper and one of her staff are placing fresh flowers in the hallway; they both stop when they see him, and bob their heads.

“His Lordship returned while you were out, sir,” the housekeeper tells him. “He wishes to see you in his study.”



“Where is Seigi?” he asks. “And my cousins?”

“Mr Nakata is in your room, sir. He has already had lunch, with Master Henry. Would you like me to prepare something for you?”

“No, thank you,” he says, although it is well past lunchtime and he is definitely hungry. He heads straight up the stairs and down the hall to his own room, his suitcase still in hand, and does not stop for breath until he finds Seigi, sitting at the desk and looking at his phone. He closes the door, sets his suitcase down, and slips his jacket off, leaning against the door to catch his breath.

Seigi waves at him, and holds up his phone.

“I was just exchanging messages with Tanimoto-san,” he explains. Richard’s heart clenches.

The sting of that particular wound, still not yet healed, is too tempting. A therapist would have a field day with Richard’s masochistic tendencies.

“Have you told her about this...proposed arrangement?”

Seigi hesitates before shaking his head.

“Not exactly. I told her I’m helping you with a family issue. Nothing more specific than that.” Richard slips off his jacket and hangs it up on the outside of the wardrobe, before taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“Seigi, have you given real thought to how this course of action might affect your other relationships?” It dawns on him as he says it that he keeps giving everyone else opportunities to call the whole thing off, when he could simply say, *‘I will not marry this man’*. He files that revelation away for later. “How might your Tanimoto-san feel about you getting married?”

The phone in Seigi’s hand buzzes, but he ignores it.

“Did I tell you that my mother’s been married twice?”

Surprised, Richard shakes his head.

“She divorced my father when I was very young, and remarried later. The man she married, Nakata-san, he works overseas a lot. But he’s good to her, and supports her well. I can see she’s definitely happier now. So I think it’s possible to end a marriage and still have a happy life afterwards.”

That certainly makes sense, even though Richard suspects that Seigi hasn’t truly considered all possible long-term ramifications for his own relationships.

“It’s not long ago that you were planning on asking Tanimoto-san on a date. The thought of her marrying someone else had you in the pits of despair, if I remember correctly. And now here you are, declaring yourself ready to marry someone else.”

Seigi turns in his seat, brushing some invisible speck off the back of the chair.

“Are you trying to talk me out of it?”

Richard laughs. He should know better than to underestimate Seigi’s perception.

“I want you to make a fully informed decision. Not just about what is best for now, but about how everyone will be affected in the long-term. Especially you.”

Richard could end this whole thing in an instant. Say, ‘ *I will not go through with this*’. Take his things, call a taxi to the airport, leave them all behind once again. And yet he does not.

“In the long term,” Seigi says, “Henry could recover from his illness, and you could have a chance to reconcile with your family. There would be no need to worry about running away anymore, because the thing you were running from would be over. You could enjoy your life without all of this hanging over you.”

“And what about your long-term?”

“I’ll be fine,” Seigi insists. “Jeffrey says he can help me make arrangements with my university to make up my missed classes, or even defer for a year. He even offered to help me find work for a few months if I do that. He says my share of the inheritance will be enough that I won’t need to work ever, but I’d prefer to work. And besides.” He dips his head for a moment, and smiles. “I’ll get to say I was married to the most beautiful person in the world. Even if it was just for a short time.”

If Deborah shattered his heart all at once, then Seigi is chipping away at it piece by piece. He doesn’t know which one is worse.

He gets up and turns to the door.

“Apparently my uncle arrived home earlier,” he says, his voice painfully steady. “I need to speak with him. Wait here for me.”

He finds Godfrey in his study, dressed about as casually as the older aristocracy ever get, in a velvet blazer and cravat with corduroy trousers. It all clashes terribly, in the way that only rich old men can get away with. Godfrey gets up and greets him with a handshake, as though they are business associates instead of family.

“Richard, my boy, good to have you home again! Don’t understand why you were paying for a hotel in the city when you’ve always got a room here.”

He gestures for Richard to sit down. Richard is reluctant to stay, but he remembers Seigi’s words from earlier, and reasons that perhaps it is better to get this conversation over with now.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were seeing someone?” Godfrey asks when he’s seated on his side of the desk again. “Did you think we’d cause a stink because you were seeing a man? Give me some credit, at least. The times they are a-changin’, and all that.”

“I had hoped to keep Seigi out of my family drama,” he says, trying to keep his voice even. He is not a child anymore, and he is not in trouble. “I don’t need to remind you what happened the last time I told my family I was involved with someone.”

Godfrey leans an elbow on the desk. His moustache twitches as he purses his lips.

“Look, Richard, while I can’t say Jeffrey’s methods were sound, he was thinking only of his brother. Harry’s got a lot of responsibility to bear, and the stress of the inheritance exacerbated it more than he could handle. But I saw him today, looking better than he’s looked in years.”

Richard crosses his legs, and clasps his hands in his lap. It’s obvious what Godfrey is trying to do - it’s not the first time any of them have tried this line of reasoning. He tries instead to take a mental step back, to consider the whole thing from a business perspective.

“Why is this one diamond so important?” he asks. “I won’t deny its value, but the Claremont estate

and businesses are surely worth far more. It's been sitting in a safe all these years, but everyone seems to be doing just fine all the same."

Across the desk, Godfrey sighs. It makes his moustache bristle, and Richard has to focus on his years of accumulated anger to keep from tittering. In many respects, he is aware, Claremont Hall seems to bring out the child in him.

"You're not wrong about that," he admits. "But you know better than anyone that the kind of privileges we have come with responsibilities. To each other, as a family, but also to the business, and to the people we employ. Capital is important in the sort of business we do, but so is reputation. What d'you think it would do, eh, if word got out that the Claremont family had to forfeit a chunk of its worth? Think about our investments. About future business. And about all the people who depend on us for their income, and their families. We lose the diamond, Richard, and we stand to lose our reputation."

It makes sense. So much sense that Richard cannot summon any reasonable counter-argument besides '*I don't want to*', and that hasn't worked since he was five. Everyone has a reason for him to concede. Henry and his health, uncle Godfrey and his employees, Seigi and his financial future, even Jeffrey and his twisted attempts at reconciliation. He could still run, but what would it cost him this time?

"If I were to go through with this," he begins, "and there is emphasis on that 'if', I would go back to Tokyo once everything was settled. I have a business there, one which I am rather proud of. And I have no intention of uprooting Seigi from his home."

"As long as you remember that you're always welcome back, even if it's just for a visit or a holiday." Godfrey leans back in his chair, looking as though he has already settled the matter. "And keep in touch, for goodness' sake! Pick up the phone every once in a while. Doesn't matter if it's five a.m. here or midnight over there. Just let us know you're still alright." He smiles. Richard cannot think of anything to say. "So this young man of yours. Jeffrey tells me he followed you all the way here from Tokyo, even before he knew about the inheritance. Sounds like he's definitely taken with you! Still, you always did turn heads, even when you were a nipper. Take after your -"

"I haven't had lunch." He stands, before Godfrey can finish speaking. "I should like to go and have something to eat, and speak with Seigi for a while."

Godfrey waves his hand.

"Of course, yes, what was I thinking? You've been out all morning. I'll call downstairs

and have them send up some sandwiches to your room, save you a trip. You go catch up with your young man, and we'll talk some more at dinner time. I know your aunt will be happy to have a celebration to plan!"

Before Richard can respond to that, his uncle picks up the internal telephone on his desk and buzzes down to the kitchen. Rather than stick around for another round of protests, he slips out of the study and heads back to his own room.

Seigi has moved to sit by the window, leaving his phone on the desk, plugged in to an adapter in the wall socket. Richard joins him on the chaise, mindful to keep some space between them.

"It seems I am outnumbered," he says, leaning an arm on the back of the couch and turning to look out of the window. "Everyone has a reason why this arrangement is the best course of action."

Seigi looks at him. His eyes are filled, not with hope, but with something that Richard cannot quite read.

“Does that mean you’re going to go ahead with it?”

“At this stage, I think the deciding point is which option will cause the least amount of worry for the least amount of people. And running away again would cause more harm than not.”

“Is that Richard-speak for ‘yes’?”

“We might make a multi-linguist of you yet.”

“Did you get your fondness for riddles from Saul?”

Seigi is almost done telling him the story of the mystery ring Saul gave him when one of the staff arrives with a tray of food. There’s more than enough for him, so the two of them have an impromptu picnic on the couch, Richard explaining the various condiments and pickles that have been served with the cold meat sandwiches, cheeses and crackers. It’s all rather pleasant, so of course that’s when Jeffrey knocks on the door, opening it without waiting for permission.

“Apparently we’re planning a civil partnership,” he says, as if he hasn’t been working on that assumption already. “Are we all on board now?”

Richard cannot bring himself to answer. Thankfully, Seigi nods a yes for both of them. Jeffrey’s smile widens even further.

He grabs the chair, turns it around and sits facing them, heedless of the meal they’re still eating.

“I think we should go over the timeline of events, so you know what needs to be done and how everything’s going to work.” Seigi nods again, while Richard remains focused on his food. Perhaps if he lets Jeffrey do the planning and simply allows everything to happen to him, it will make things easier. “Nakata-kun needs to have been in the country for seven days before you can register your intent to have a civil partnership. That time’s almost up, so at the end of the week you can go take your passports and register. Dad says you should go to Westminster, but Stevenage is closer, and probably less likely to result in the two of you ending up in one of the gossip rags if someone recognises Ricky. Then you have to wait out the twenty-eight day waiting period before you can actually have the civil partnership.”

“Why do we have to wait that long?” Seigi asks, picking at the remains of his beef and horseradish sandwich.

“It’s a legal thing,” Jeffrey explains with a wave of his hand. “Legally, you have to announce your intent and then allow time for anyone who thinks you shouldn’t get married to raise an objection. It’s an old thing, supposedly in case someone else knew one of you was already married, or secretly related. Nothing for you two to worry about, though.”

“How would anyone know that someone had registered intent?”

“The registry of intent gets published.” Jeffrey looks through the papers in his hand. Richard notices Seigi suddenly become very focused on his sandwich, but since he doesn’t say anything, Richard simply decides to remember it, in case it comes up later. “Now, a friend of mine had a civil partnership not too long ago, and he says that when you register, you each get asked a few questions about the other - when you met, when you started seeing each other, do you know each other’s birthdays, that sort of thing. *That* is to ensure that the relationship is genuine and not forced or for immigration purposes. Again, shouldn’t be an issue for you two. Once that’s over, you can

start arrangements for the actual civil union. It's up to you if you just want a registry office service with a couple of witnesses, or if you want to splash out and have guests and a big reception party afterwards. Word to the wise - mum will probably want to plan a party for the two of you. We haven't had one for a while."

Richard shakes his head.

"No party," he says, voice firm. "I do not want any unnecessary attention during all of this."

Jeffrey laughs, and shakes his head.

"I doubt mum will give you much say in the matter. Best to let her get on with it. And you never know, you might get some good wedding presents out of it."

Seigi, still picking at the last of his food, looks up at Richard.

"So during the twenty-eight days, what do we do?"

"You should do your best to keep up with your studies," Richard tells him, "and perhaps I can discuss with Saul whether I can schedule some appointments here." He turns to Jeffrey. "Or perhaps Seigi can return to Tokyo in the interim so that he can continue to attend classes."

"No," says Seigi, startling Richard with his insistence. "I mean, won't there be things we need to do here?"

"Well, I was planning to talk to Mr Garrett about having the diamond released to you both once you've registered intent," Jeffrey answers, looking between the two of them. "So there'll be the paperwork for that. And you'll want to make at least some plans for the ceremony. Rings, for one thing. Nakata-kun, if you like, I can help you contact your university to talk about deferring."

Richard brushes crumbs from his fingers, before taking his handkerchief to wipe his hands. The others wait for him to speak.

"I do not wish to stay cooped up here for four weeks, regardless of what needs to be done for the ceremony."

Jeffrey puts a hand to his mouth for a moment, as he appears to think.

"Okay, I'll tell you what." He drops his voice, even though there is no one else around to hear them. "I keep a flat in Kensington - nothing fancy, just a studio, but it's useful when I've got business in the city. I'll let you have the keys for a month, as long as you promise me that you're not going to do a runner again as soon as you're out of sight."

"I promise," says Seigi, before he looks to Richard.

"If that is what it takes to get us some privacy," Richard says, "then I suppose I have little choice but to accept."

"Excellent!" Jeffrey leans back in his seat, his usual smile back in place. "As soon as we've been to the registry office, I'll take you there. Of course the two of you will want some privacy. I should have realised sooner."

Eventually he manages to get Jeffrey to leave them alone again, and Richard stands up from the bed, stretching his legs and walking over to the window. The day feels like it's been non-stop conversations and he could really do with some time to himself, but there is more to be done yet.

Still, perhaps a walk outside might be refreshing.

“Have you spoken to your mother about all of this?” he asks Seigi, looking out over the grounds. When Seigi tells him no, he hasn’t, Richard hums in thought. “Given the time difference, perhaps that is something to save for the morning.”

“Do you need to call Saul?”

Of course, there is that too. Richard huffs a mirthless laugh.

“I will, when you call your mother.” It’s not a conversation he’s looking forward to, but that seems to be the way things are lately. He tells himself that, if it will allow him to spend a quiet month in Kensington before the ceremony itself, then perhaps it will be easier to get those difficult conversations out of the way.

## Chapter 3

Dinner that evening ends up being a little grander than either Richard or Seigi would like. Since it's the first time that all three Claremont boys and the Earl and his wife have been together for several years, the staff have been asked to go all out for the meal. Seigi seems a little anxious about only having jeans and T-shirts to wear; Richard assures him it's not a problem at all, but ends up lending him a shirt so that he can at least feel as though he is dressed more appropriately. They go down to the dining room together, finding the rest of the family already seated and chatting. Every one of them is smiling.

They all turn and greet Richard and Seigi as though it's a party, and Richard sees Seigi bob his head towards his aunt and uncle before they sit down.

Over the first course, Jeffrey explains to his parents the plans that have been made for the next few days. His aunt, as expected, declares that she will lend a hand planning a suitable celebration, dismissing Jeffrey's suggestion that the two of them most likely want just a quiet registry office ceremony with little fanfare.

"This family is long overdue a good party," she tells the table, raising her glass. Seigi looks to him for a translation, and Richard hates to exclude him from the conversation, but simply tells him that it is something to be discussed later.

Predictably, his aunt and uncle have countless questions for the two of them, so conversation involves a lot of translating back and forth, mostly by Jeffrey, except when Richard steps in to deflect any questions that might be difficult. He tries to gauge their tones for any subtle digs or hints of disapproval, and while nothing strikes him as offensive, he cannot shake the sense that everyone seems a little too happy, too eager for their impending partnership. He is glad when dessert is finally over, and declines the invitation to join Godfrey and Jeffrey for a drink in the drawing room. Instead, they head back to Richard's room, taking turns to shower and change, and then sit for a while in peaceful silence, Richard with a book and Seigi with his laptop, learning how to tether it to Richard's mobile phone so he can go online.

When Seigi declares himself ready for bed, Richard says he means to stay up a while longer. His old dressing gown is still hanging inside the wardrobe, and smells as though it has been washed recently; he slips it on over his pyjamas, and leaves the room.

The upstairs halls seem exactly the same as he remembers them, every painting still in the same place, the same chairs and benches in the same spots. Downstairs, there are small changes: a landscape painting he doesn't recognise, a tall vase on a table where there used to be a chair. But his feet still remember their way around, and he can find the music room without hesitation.

Someone is already at the piano. Rachmaninov, if he's not mistaken. The notes are hesitant, tentative, but it builds, gradually settling as though the pianist is rediscovering an old favourite. It tugs at some half-buried memory in Richard's mind as he leans against the doorframe.

"First time he's played in at least three months." Jeffrey's voice startles him, and he turns to see his cousin, also dressed for bed and carrying two mugs of something hot and sweet-smelling. "If I'd known you were still up, I'd have made some for you too."

Jeffrey shoulders open the door to the music room and stands there, giving Richard no choice but to follow him in. The music stops abruptly when Henry sees him. He smiles, and Richard allows himself to return it. Jeffrey passes one of the cups to his brother and then, after a brief

hesitation, offers the second one to Richard. There is no way he can refuse it without looking petty, and he is too tired to keep up that front anymore today.

“It’s nice to have both of you at home,” Henry says, somehow giving the word ‘nice’ far more worth than it deserves. “I hope that we’ll see more of you after you’re married, Richard.”

Richard takes a slow sip of his drink as he decides how best to answer.

“Perhaps we can look into video calls,” suggests Jeffrey, before he can come up with anything. “I know Ricky’s got a thriving business of his own in Tokyo, and we wouldn’t want to keep him away from it.”

That spurs Henry to ask about life in Japan for a while, and Richard goes along with it, telling Henry about his favourite places to eat, and how the different areas of Tokyo compare with the regions of London’s city centre. It’s easy enough to allow Henry’s light-hearted questions to carry him along, but there is no denying the undercurrent of tension, the stinging reminder not to reveal anything too personal, or get too comfortable.

When Henry runs out of questions, he begins tapping at the piano keys again, until Jeffrey squeezes on to the bench next to him and they strike up a fumbling rendition of a duet they made up when they were children, back when Jeffrey’s hands were barely big enough to play a chord. They laugh their way through to the end of it, and then Henry launches into the opening bars of some ancient music hall number that his piano teacher would never have approved of. Jeffrey’s face lights up, and he turns to Richard with wickedness in his eyes.

“Feel like a sing-along, Ricky?”

That is a step too far for him, and he sets his empty mug down on an end-table.

“It’s time for me to turn in,” he says instead. “I have much to do in the morning.”

Surprisingly, they don’t try to cajole him into staying, simply bidding him goodnight and letting him leave.

In the morning, the bed is empty again when he wakes up, but Seigi is still in the room this time, sitting on the chaise and looking out of the window, his phone in his hand. He smiles when he sees Richard is awake. Richard wants nothing more than to close his eyes again, to stay warm in bed and think about actually waking up with Seigi still in his bed, but Seigi gets up and starts speaking, and it would be rude to ignore him.

“You woke up just in time,” he tells Richard, going over to the desk. “There’s tea.”

“Did you make it?” His voice is rough and sleep-thick, and he hates that Seigi has to see him before he has had time to ready himself to face the day.

“No, the staff sent it up.”

Richard slumps back down and pulls the covers over his head. It’s not enough to drown out the sound of Seigi laughing at him.

When he has finally roused himself and showered and dressed, they go down to breakfast together, and eat toast and croissants with Henry and Godfrey and Anna Marie, who all take turns asking Seigi how he is enjoying his stay and how he finds the food, while Richard dutifully translates. It’s all very pleasant and polite, and Richard hates every second of it.



Back in his own room, they both stand awkwardly for a while. Richard only has one thing to do today: speak to Saul about his current situation and the future of Jewellery Étranger. Likewise, Seigi needs to speak to his mother. Evidently, neither of them are in any hurry to have those conversations.

“It’s a pleasant day,” he says at last, when he can stall no longer. “Why don’t we see if there is a decent phone signal outside?”

They wind up near the gardens in the glass house. Seigi pulls up his mother’s number on his phone, and stares at it for a while.

“Would you like to use my phone?” Richard asks, offering it to him. “I have a business plan, so an international call will cost less than if you use your own.”

Seigi takes it and thanks him, putting in the dialling code with his help before copying Hiromi’s number over from his own phone. And even though he really did make the offer to be helpful, Richard knows that it also gives him more time before he has to speak to Saul

He wanders over to the glass house to give Seigi some privacy. This late in the year, there is little in bloom, and a table has been brought in for the gardeners to use for potting. He wonders if the gardeners know about the diamond, or even care, for that matter. Do they care that Richard has returned, or that he is planning to marry? While he doubts that their livelihoods would really be affected if the diamond was forfeited, he finds himself considering, perhaps for the first time, just how many people really do depend on the Claremonts for their income. How many families are supported by the Claremont estate?

Although he is genuinely trying not to eavesdrop on Seigi’s conversation, he can’t help noticing that Seigi looks a little agitated as he speaks. Eventually, Seigi waves him over, holding out the phone to him.

“Hirmoi wants to speak with you,” he explains with an apologetic shrug.

“Richard-san?” Her voice is clear over the phone despite the long distance, and he marvels, just for a moment, at the wonders of technology. “Is it true that my son is in England right now?”

He steels himself: he can deal with his family berating him, and even Saul, but Nakata Hiromi has every right to be angry with both of them.

“That is correct,” he tells her, “and I apologise for the suddenness of his departure.”

“He says you want to make him your partner? I thought he just did cleaning and odd jobs at a shop. I don’t know how I feel about him going into full-time work before he finishes university.”

Suddenly he realises why Seigi called him over. How on earth is he supposed to clear up *this* misunderstanding?

“Nakata-san, you are aware, I’m sure, that I am in the business of selling and appraising precious stones,” he begins, feeling his story shaping itself even as he speaks it. “I am working on behalf of a family I know in England to secure ownership of a very valuable diamond. The details of the acquisition are rather complex and formal, and require that I work with a partner. I have therefore agreed to make Seigi my partner, on paper, on a temporary basis.”

There is a pause, and Richard uses it to plead with the universe that his technical truth will hold up to a mother’s scrutiny.

“I see,” says Hiromi eventually, although she doesn’t sound entirely certain. “But he says he will be in England for at least another month, and that he might even miss the rest of the year at university.”

“The family we are working with assure us that Seigi will be compensated handsomely in return for his commitment.” He doesn’t want to name a figure, but decides to tell her, “At least enough to cover his tuition and rent until he graduates.”

He hears her gasp, and hopes that he has sold the arrangement suitably well.

“Is this all above board, Richard-san? I don’t want my son getting involved in any shady deals.”

“I can assure you that everything is being done in accordance with British legal procedure.” It’s almost scary how easy it is to talk about the whole thing as a business deal; he files that away in his growing collection of ‘Things To Deal With Later’. “Furthermore, I will endeavour to ensure that Seigi keeps up with his studies while he is here. I can even provide some English tuition, which will help him during his stay and beyond.”

There is silence for a moment, before she asks him to put Seigi back on. Richard hands over the phone and steps away again. This time, Seigi’s side of the conversation seems easier; he smiles, at least, as he tells his mother goodbye and ends the call.

“I’m sorry,” he tells Richard as he hands back the phone. “I was trying to work out how to explain the civil partnership, but she assumed I meant business partners, and I didn’t know how to correct her.”

Richard looks at his phone, turning it over and over in his hand.

“Perhaps it may be best for us both to treat this arrangement as a business contact?” he suggests. “After all, everything I said to your mother was true.” He watches an unreadable expression cross Seigi’s face, before he nods.

“If that’s what you think is best.”

He pulls up Saul’s number, then changes his mind and selects the number for the Ginza shop, pressing ‘call’ before he can change his mind. Part of him hopes that there will be no answer and he can put off the call a little longer; it must be late in the day there, and Saul could well have closed up shop and returned to wherever he is staying. But Saul answers after three rings, greeting him with the cheery voice he uses for customers.

“It’s Richard,” he says, and he can picture Saul’s face becoming stern.

“The prodigal son! Or can I only call you that when you return to your business here?”

Richard knows that Saul does not mean to make him feel like a child; the reaction is entirely his own. Still, he hates that feeling. Saul has seen him at his absolute worst, and Richard will probably always feel that hold over him, in spite of Saul’s benevolence.

“I am currently the prodigal nephew of Claremont Hall,” he says, the words falling out like a weary sigh.

“And did your part-timer find you?”

“Seigi is here with me now.”

“Excellent! Perhaps when you both return to your shop, you can regale me with that story; that would perhaps be better than dragging out an international call.”

Richard braces himself for what he is about to say.

“Unfortunately, that may not happen just yet. Which is why I called you.”

“Oh?” He can picture Saul’s face, eyebrows arched up, mouth curved into the beginning of a surprised smile. “And why might that be? No, let me guess. You and Nakata-kun are going to get married in order to inherit the famed Claremont diamond.”

He says nothing.

“Well, I must say, that was not what I expected when your assistant told me he was setting out to find you.”

“We are treating it as a business deal,” Richard explains, wishing away the image of Saul’s smiling face from his mind. “Seigi and I will sign a contract of sorts, allowing us to take possession of the diamond. Then, we may choose to sell it to the Claremonts, or perhaps another buyer. Seigi will be more than adequately compensated for his time, and after the whole thing is done I can, if I want, wash my hands of them for good.”

There is a pause, and Richard imagines Saul tugging at the curled end of his moustache.

“Richard, choosing to stop running from your family problems and face them head on is admirable. But are you certain you can simply treat this as a business arrangement? And can Nakata-kun?”

Seigi has wandered over to look at the glass house, and Richard is grateful for the relative privacy.

“This is not how I would have chosen to bring the matter to a close, but under current circumstances, it may be the one which causes the least harm. Certainly, it’s better than the method Seigi had chosen, and I am thankful that course of action did not come to pass.”

“Oh? Mr part-time pudding maker? What did he intend to do?”

“Break the diamond.”

He has to hold the phone away from his ear until Saul’s raucous laughter has died down. It takes a while.

“The young man who thought he could save you with pudding? Well, he is brave, I’ll give him that.”

“How do you know about the pudding?” While he knows that Seigi and Saul have met, he cannot imagine Seigi making pudding for him. Even thinking about it makes his thoughts prickly uncomfortably.

“I think I have learned rather a lot about your assistant during the short time I spent with him.” Saul’s voice becomes more solemn. “So for that reason, I must ask you, Richard, to give him as much consideration as anything or anyone else in all of this. You say you are treating this as a business venture, but are you certain he can maintain the same impartiality?”

When he looks towards the glass house, he sees Seigi peering through the open door, thankfully

out of earshot.

“Saul, I can assure you that Seigi is first in my thoughts in all of this.” He takes a long breath in, watching Seigi’s back. “I know he is young, and impulsive. But I am determined to make sure that he comes out of this intact. Or at least, better than I will.”

He thinks he hears Saul make a thoughtful noise, or maybe it’s just distortion due to the long-distance call.

“Perhaps this arrangement may find a way to work out after all.” Before Richard can ask Saul what he means by that, Saul clears his throat and continues. “Which leaves the matter of your little shop, and what is to become of it while you are playing house in England.”

“I want to come back,” he says, a little too quickly. “That shop is-” He takes a breath, but his voice still shakes when he speaks again. “Well, it’s the closest I’ve found to a home in a long time. I can’t walk away from it for good.”

“So what am I to do in the meantime? There is no sense paying rent on an empty shop, and I cannot stay here for a full month.”

Richard sighs. Saul is right, and given the choice, he would much rather go back and work from Ginza up until the date of their civil ceremony, but he doubts Jeffrey would let him leave London until the diamond is secured.

“Can we sub-let?”

“I can look into it. Or perhaps I could have someone else work from here in the interim?”

The thought of someone else working in his shop makes his skin prickle. It would be like knowing someone else had looked through his underwear drawer. But he is several thousand miles away, unable to do anything about it.

“Whatever you think is best,” he says, suppressing another sigh. “If it helps, I could take some appointments here. Perhaps some networking while I’m in London could help for future business. It would certainly help to have some income, and to keep me from going spare over the coming weeks.”

“I’ll see what I can do about sending customers your way,” Saul tells him.

They wrap up their call with a few business details, and Richard is ready to hang up, feeling surprisingly worn out from his two conversations, when Saul asks to speak to Seigi.

Richard looks around, seeing no sign of him, but a quick investigation finds him inside the glass house, smelling one of the late-blooming roses. His eyes widen, and his mouth opens into a smile, and Richard wishes he had a camera to capture the moment of unabashed delight.

When Seigi sees him, Richard offers him the phone, before stepping outside to give him some privacy. On a bench near the shrubbery, he waits and considers what Saul said. ‘Playing house’? How long will he and Seigi have to keep up the pretense of being a couple? They’ve hardly been demonstrably affectionate with each other; if anything, Richard was downright cold to Seigi at times since they got into the car with Jeffrey and Henry. It’s sometimes hard to imagine how any of them could mistake him for Seigi’s lover.

Then again, they haven’t protested at having to share a bed. Seigi got Henry to help him make tea for Richard, despite the language barrier. And then there’s Seigi’s habit of running his mouth

about Richard's looks. He thinks about the jewellery sales clerk in the Tokyo department store. Two Noritake cups, with gold bands. And Seigi, who came all the way to England to find him.

Seigi begged Saul to know where he had gone, and spent his precious savings on a plane ticket to London, even though he might not have known how to find Richard once he arrived, if it hadn't been for Jeffrey following him to the airport. Has anyone else ever done so much for him? Just that thought alone is enough to wrap around his heart like an embrace. Perhaps he could tell Seigi the significance of his actions, and ask if it means what Richard wants it to mean. Would he dare? Would he put his whole heart out in the open, if it meant facing the possibility of hearing Seigi say, *'I just wanted to help someone in need'* before he went back to pining for his classmate?

He can't help but think back to Deborah, and how organically things had grown between them. The time she rested her head on his shoulder when she was tired; the time she'd grabbed his hand and led him over to see something during a gallery visit; the way she'd made him feel safe enough to reach out for her when he needed a moment of comfort. Seigi has not hugged him, or walked hand-in-hand with him. But Seigi has learned to make royal milk tea just the way he likes, and Seigi has made pudding, and Seigi has flown halfway around the world to find him. Seigi has said, *'I really like you'*, more than once, and Richard so desperately wants to feel safe enough to reach out once again.

Whatever Saul has to say to Seigi doesn't take long, because Seigi soon returns from the glass house to give him back his phone. Richard pats the bench beside him, and Seigi sits there, and for a moment he feels the sun on his face and the nearness of Seigi's arm to his own, and wonders if he dares to lay his head on Seigi's shoulder.

"Thanks for talking to Hiromi," Seigi tells him, breaking the silence and pulling him out of his thoughts.

"Saul is going to make arrangements for the Ginza shop while I am away. I would like to return there as soon as I am able."

"I'd like that too. I can't imagine anyone else working in there. Not even Saul, really, even though I met him there." Seigi tips his head back, and the sun warms his skin with a lustre finer than any pearl Richard has ever seen. "That's all I wanted, when I came to London. To get you to come back to your shop, so I could work with you again there. Not having that - not knowing if I'd ever have that again - it made me feel like something had been ripped out of me."

Another piece of Richard's heart is chipped away.

*Now, he thinks, right now I could set my head on his shoulder and tell him I felt exactly the same when I left.*

"I want you to know that it is not too late to change your mind about all of this." God, he really is a masochist, he thinks. "Even after we register our intent, even when we are on the verge of saying 'I do', you can still change your mind. You can go back to Tokyo, resume your studies, go back to normal." *Go back to Tanimoto*, he almost says. It's like he's testing Seigi, daring him to back out, or to confess.

"Is that what you want?"

Is it? If he sends Seigi back to Tokyo tomorrow, can he go back to work knowing how bad Henry's health really is? Knowing how many employees of the Claremont estate might lose their income? Knowing that his aunt and uncle would never speak to him again?

“What I want is for all this to end.” The words fall out of him like dropping a heavy bag from his shoulder. “I want to not feel like I’m running away anymore. And more than anything, I really, *really*, want a cup of tea.”

Seigi’s whole body shakes as he laughs, until Richard joins in too. *Now*, he thinks, *right now I could set my head on his shoulder and tell him I want to take him home, to Tokyo, and eat pudding in my shop.*

Seigi stands, and looks down at him.

“Let’s go inside. I’ll make tea.”

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At his aunt’s suggestion, they take lunch on the terrace overlooking the gardens.

Jeffrey is absent, and the meal ends up being comfortably pleasant, with Seigi telling everyone about flower viewing season via Richard’s translation. Afterwards, they head inside and use Richard’s laptop to look at Seigi’s options for online study. As it turns out, there is very little available to him; at least, not enough that he might reasonably keep up with his classmates and pass the year successfully. So they turn to exploring the option of deferring. Richard is not pleased with this option, for all that Seigi keeps insisting that he’ll be fine and that lots of students end up doing an extra year because their jobs make studying difficult. Richard once again raises the possibility of Seigi returning to Japan for the interim between registering intent and holding the civil ceremony, but Seigi is oddly anxious about this option.

“Jeffrey said that our names would be published somewhere once we register, didn’t he?” Seigi asks, not quite looking at Richard. “So if someone searched for my name on the Internet, they might find out that I was going to marry you. So it might be better if I’m not in Japan for the time being. For Hiromi’s sake, as much as mine.”

Ah. So that’s it. He bristles a little at the thought of Seigi being ashamed of having people he knows find out that he is engaged to another man. But they are still hiding the full truth from Seigi’s mother. It’s not ideal, but it’s understandable.

“So deferring until next year may be your only option, if you wish to graduate at all,” Richard concedes, looking over the staff contacts list on the university web page. It’s a monumental ask, a huge risk for Seigi, and Richard knows that if things go sour then he will have to take responsibility for Seigi’s lost year of studying. “If we do this, then we must agree that you will make up for your missed classes in some way. We will find study materials for you here, or find some online courses with another university. And I told your mother that I would provide some English tuition, which I expect you to make the most of.”

“Of course! I feel like, with you teaching me, I could learn anything!”

He closes his eyes for a moment, unable to bear the weight of Seigi’s trust in him.

Together, they draft a concise e-mail to Seigi’s university, explaining that Seigi has been called out of the country unexpectedly to deal with some family business pertaining to an inheritance. Yet again, Richard finds that he can give just enough of the truth to be believable without explaining the circumstances entirely. It is almost scary how easy it is to fabricate these stories. They must be sure, he reminds himself, to keep track of what they have told to whom, to keep from bringing the

whole facade crashing down around them.

They break for tea at a little after four, politely asking the kitchen staff to allow them use of the stove before they start preparing dinner, and take their drinks on a tray to the drawing room. Seigi spends a while poring over the room's decorations, asking about paintings and carpets with unyielding enthusiasm, eventually declaring himself a 'student of England'. Richard asks if he means to learn the language, or the geography, the history, or the art.

"Everything," Seigi says, his face determined. "I want to learn as much as I can while I'm here. When will I get an opportunity like this again?"

Godfrey finds them then, before Richard can make a fool of himself over Seigi's relentless optimism. He asks how they're finding the house, and tells them dinner will be at seven.

"Actually," Richard says, rising from his seat, "I would like to take Seigi out to dinner tonight. We have been cooped up for rather a while and could both do with a change of scenery."

"Of course, my boy!" Godfrey gives him one of those awful knowing smiles, and a wink that makes Richard want to run screaming from the room. "Two of you need a bit of privacy without the family nosing in on all your business. I understand. When your aunt and I were courting, the last thing I wanted was the family breathing down our necks every minute!" He thinks for a moment, then his face lights up. "Why don't you borrow the Triumph? Take your young man out for a drive, eh? How'd you like that?"

Richard would very much like that, although he does not let it show on his face.

Godfrey goes off to fetch the key, and he and Seigi go upstairs to collect their jackets. Soon after, they are peeling down the driveway with the top down, the autumn breeze in their hair, and smiles on their faces.

Almost an hour of driving lands them in a village with a cosy pub boasting 'traditional British fare' and a CAMRA sticker in the window. He parks up, taking a moment to appreciate the car, then leads Seigi inside. There is a fire in the hearth. Someone's dog is resting under a table. There is a sign over a low doorway pointing to The Snug. It is a perfect picture of a traditional British pub, and Seigi clearly wants to ask about *everything*.

It's almost like being back at Shiseido Parlour, explaining items on the menu and talking about culture to someone who is happy to listen to everything he has to say. The landlady tries to talk him into trying the local brewery's beer, until he explains that he is driving, but Seigi happily accepts a half-pint, beaming when it arrives in a traditional glass mug with a handle.

Could they just do this for the next month? Richard could bear it, perhaps, if they could just have the month to themselves to talk and explore and enjoy each other's company. Jeffrey's offer of his Kensington flat is very tempting, for all that he hates that area of London. But oh, just the two of them, sharing breakfast, hanging their clothes in the same wardrobe, exploring the city and going home together at the end of the day; the thought of it holds his heart and warms it like hot cocoa in winter.

They take their time with the food, and after the landlady has cleared their plates, she tells them they have desserts too. So of course they stay for rhubarb crumble and custard, and a second beer for Seigi, whose face is warmed and glowing from the fire and the drink. Richard imagines the two of them sharing wine in some faceless Kensington upstairs flat, when he can indulge a little knowing that his bed is just a short walk away. Imagines Seigi soft and wine-drunk, loose-limbed and affectionate, resting his head on Richard's shoulder until Richard steers him to their bed, where

they tangle together under the sheets, hands clasped and faces kissing-close.

It's a dangerous dream, and he knows it will hurt him sooner or later, when their facade ends and Seigi goes back to university and his friends, and to the girl he can't bear to name. But Richard has spent too long alone, and his hands ache to be held and his head longs for a shoulder to lean on, and his heart wants to be filled again, even if it is only for a short while. So he will play pretend for a month, say his vows even if he can't mean them, and tell himself it is worth it, somehow, for someone else, if not for him.



## Chapter 4

### Chapter Notes

A slightly shorter chapter this week. If any Britishisms need explaining, do let me know in the comments!

I should note that I have never gone through the process of registering a marriage/partnership. Seigi and Richard's registration interview here is based on anecdotes from friends who had registry office weddings. The part about having to register and wait 28 days before you can actually have your wedding/civil ceremony is actual British legal procedure.

“When is Richard’s birthday?”

“Christmas Eve,” says Seigi in well-practised English. He smiles at his own accomplishment.

“And where does Richard live?” Richard asks his questions slowly, watching Seigi’s face to check that he understands. Jeffrey is going with them to the registry office to act as interpreter, but Richard wants Seigi to be able to speak for himself as much as possible.

“He has a apartment in Ginza.”

Richard ignores his grammar, deciding that meaning is more important than syntax in this case, and nods his approval. There will be time to polish Seigi’s English later.

“And where did you and Richard meet?”

“We met at Yoyogi Park, in Tokyo.” Seigi frowns for a moment, before switching back to Japanese. “I want to tell them the story of how we met, but I don’t know if I can explain it all in English.”

“You don’t need to worry about that, I think,” Richard tells him. “The aim of the questions is to ascertain that this is not a forced marriage, or a marriage for immigration purposes. Since we do not intend to live in the UK, I think that should assure the registrar that we are not doing this for citizenship.”

Seigi rolls up a T-shirt and stuffs it into his backpack. They don’t have many things to pack between them, but somehow they have managed to drag the process out for far longer than necessary, as though they are both trying to put off their visit to the registry office for as long as possible.

“Do you think they will believe we’re actually a couple?” he asks, balling up a pair of socks. “I mean, I don’t know how couples are supposed to behave. Is it different for two men?”

Somehow, Richard bites down the exasperated sound his treacherous mouth wants to make. *Do you realise how many people have already mistaken us for a couple?* he does not say.

“When you see two people together on the street in Tokyo, how do you tell whether they’re dating or friends?” he asks instead, wondering if perhaps he can help Seigi to catch on himself.

“Well, I suppose if they’re standing close together,” he says, squeezing the socks still in his hands. “Or saying nice things to one another. Like, they look at each other like they’re more special than anyone else around.”

“And do you think that’s very different from how we treat one another?” He watches Seigi’s face for any hint of understanding.

“I guess I do always think that you’re the most special person in any room, so it’s easy to look at you more than anyone else.” The only thing on Seigi’s face is a smile. Richard doesn’t know whether he wants to kiss it or slap it. He grabs a pillow from the bed and plumps it up, as if it wasn’t perfectly neat to begin with.

“I think if we can answer their basic questions about each other, then we don’t need to do anything we haven’t already done to convince the registrar that we are dating,” he says, through gritted teeth.

Jeffrey finds them just as they finish their packing, and escorts them down the main staircase where the rest of the family are waiting to see them off. He wonders if it is all an attempt to remind him of the consequences if he attempts to flee again. Anna MArie tells him she will stay in touch to discuss the details for the ceremony, and Godfrey says he may drop in on them if he has business in the city. Henry suggests that they meet for lunch sometime, and Richard really cannot say no to him, not when Henry smiles so warmly. Already, his face has more colour than it did when Richard first saw him a week ago.

For the journey into Stevenage, they have the same car and driver that brought them to Claremont Hall a week ago, although this journey passes by much quicker, for Richard at least. Once they are a good mile away from the house, Jeffrey hands Seigi a thick envelope with his name on it.

“I realise you weren’t planning on staying in the country more than a couple of days, and since you’re not working for Ricky right now you may not have much money available,” he tells Seigi. “So that should be enough to tide you over until the wedding.” Realising what’s in the envelope, Seigi gasps and tries to hand it back, but Jeffrey refuses. “Consider it a small advance on your share of the inheritance, if you like.”

In the end, Seigi hands it to Richard, who slips it into the inside pocket of his jacket, ignoring yet another knowing look from his cousin.

As they pass through a series of small villages, Jeffrey talks Seigi through what to expect at the registry office, reassuring him that he can ask as many questions as he needs and can rely on Jeffrey to translate when Richard is not in the office with him. It should all be straightforward, and Seigi puts on a smile, but Richard can sense his anxiousness, can see the way he fidgets with his jacket and his seatbelt. Once they have finished at the office, he should really do something nice for Seigi. Dinner, or perhaps a shopping trip.

The registry office is busy, with several people already in the waiting area. They take a seat to wait for their appointment, and Richard pays extra attention to Seigi. It’s likely that being surrounded by nothing but English conversations and English signs is a little intimidating for him. He inclines his head toward Seig, speaking low so that no one else can hear.

“Shall we go out to dinner later?”

“Does London have anywhere like Shiseido Parlour?”

He can’t help but chuckle at that.

“Plenty of places. But think about what type of food you would like to eat, and we will find somewhere suitable.”

A few seats away, a young couple around Seigi’s age are talking quickly to each other, heads bowed low. He realises that they are reciting facts: first date, first kiss, when they moved in together. They have a white-knuckle grip on each other’s hand, and he finds himself surprised by a pang of sympathy for them. He wonders if he and Seigi should run a similar last-minute check of details, then decides it might make their case look a little more suspicious. Instead, on an impulse he cannot quite explain, he reaches out and takes Seigi’s hand in his own, offering what he hopes is a reassuring smile. Seigi’s eyes widen for a moment, but he wraps his fingers around Richard’s ducking his head so that Richard only sees a hint of the small smile on his face. It’s likely he’s unused to such displays when other people are around: hugging in a hotel room in private is one thing; holding hands in public is quite another.

It’s because they are holding hands that Richard feels Seigi startle when someone calls their names. They stand together, hands still clasped, and follow the registrar into one of the private offices, leaving Jeffrey in the waiting room. They continue to hold hands as they sit again, this time on one side of a large desk across from the registrar, who introduces herself as Alison, talks them through the official forms and checks their passports and documentation. It’s about as stripped of romance as wedding planning can possibly be, and for that Richard is rather grateful. It really is little more than signing a business contract.

When Alison tells them that Seigi must then go to another office to complete more paperwork alone, Richard tells her that his cousin is able to act as an interpreter, but she shakes her head.

“Actually, we have an officer on staff today who speaks Japanese, so Mr Nakata can have his interview with them.”

He quickly translates this to Seigi, trying to keep the worry from his voice. Seigi appears to consider it for a second, before nodding his head.

“I’ll be fine,” he says with a wave of his hand. “Maybe it’ll be better this way?”

He is escorted out of the room, and Richard has no choice but to stay behind.

“This is nothing to worry about,” the registrar tells him, pulling a new form from a folder and setting it on the desk. “This procedure is mostly to ensure that the partnership is not a forced one, or being entered into for citizenship purposes. We have to be vigilant, you know.” She puts the form on a clipboard, and holds it at such an angle that Richard cannot see it at all.

“So, why don’t you start by telling me how you two met?”

He talks her through the events in Yoyogi Park all those months ago, about Seigi sitting with him at the police box, and how he was so surprised that a stranger would be so helpful. When she asks how they got to know each other, he explains about the ring, and the trip to Kobe, and how he eventually offered Seigi a job. The registrar seems to have a knack for making the questions seem like friendly conversation, and somehow Richard ends up telling her that he hadn’t been sure whether he would need a part-timer, but the offer had seemed like the perfect way to see more of Seigi,

She smiles at that, ignoring the form for a moment.

“I pretended to be a football fan for a good three months so I’d have an excuse to talk to someone I liked,” she tells him. “Used to study match results and lurk on forums so I’d have things to talk

about.”

“Did it work?” Something about the way she tells it is undeniably compelling.

“We got married last year. I ended up becoming more of a football fan than him! Season ticket, replica shirt, the lot! I drew the line at having the wedding at White Hart Lane, though.”

After that, the questions flow like a chat over brunch. She asks Seigi’s birthday, and he tells her it passed him by this year because they were still very much employer and employee back in May, and he tells her he intends to make up for it next year. When she asks where they intend to live after the ceremony, he doesn’t just tell her they’re going back to Tokyo; he talks about wanting to find a two-bedroom apartment in the city where they can be close to work and not draw too much attention from nosey neighbours like they might if they bought a house together in the suburbs. He tells her how certain wards are now starting to recognise same-gender partnerships, and when he mentions the Shibuya ordinance, he smiles at the memory of Seigi looking at diamonds and confusing the sales clerk, and when the registrar gives him a quizzical look, he ends up telling that story too. It’s so easy to pretend that it’s real; he feels himself *wanting* it to be real, even feels the faint sting of knowing what will happen when he has to stop pretending.

By the time they’re done, he feels like he’s spent an hour with an old friend. The registrar likely knows far more than she needs for her form, and he wonders if every visitor to her office gets the same treatment. Whether she means it or not, it’s certainly an effective way of sniffing out anyone who might not hold genuine romantic feelings for their intended partner.

She holds open the door for him to return to the waiting room. Seigi is already there, sitting with Jeffrey and chatting with the other officer who took him away earlier. Everyone seems to be happy enough, and when they notice him, they smile. The two registrars hold some kind of silent exchange made up of nods and expressions, before they turn to him and Seigi.

“Everything seems to be in order with your paperwork,” says Alison. “We’ll confirm everything in writing to the address you provided, but in the meantime, you can go ahead and start making plans for your ceremony. Congratulations!”

They both head back to their respective offices, leaving the three of them to make their way out of the building.

“I’ll all mum and tell her she can go ahead with the ceremony plans,” Jeffrey says as they leave. “Not that there was any doubt.”

“I am ready to see this flat,” Richard says, deciding he has had enough wedding talk for today.

Back in the car, Jeffrey begins telling Seigi about the flat they’ll be using for the next few weeks. Richard knows Kensington only vaguely, having categorised it in his mind as ‘Chelsea for old people’. He remembers tall terraced houses and expensive cars, but little else from his occasional visits there. What most people would call ‘classy’, its character contained entirely in its understated wealth. As Jeffrey goes on, Richard turns his head to look out of the window instead.

He and Deborah never registered their intent to marry. They never really talked much about a wedding - Richard hadn’t even given her an engagement ring. They’d talked about marriage, living together, sometimes whiling away quiet moments building up a shared daydream of a house with a garden and a dog. Sometimes they’d joked about eloping, running off to Gretna Green then honeymooning at a campsite on the way back, more to annoy their families than anything else.

Just thinking about those conversations brings back a familiar tightness in his chest, although he’s

never entirely sure if it's Deborah he misses or if it's simply being in a relationship: the security of knowing someone wanted to be around him. It's the same quandary that occasionally has him questioning his nebulous feelings for Seigi. Is it Seigi himself that makes Richard feel warm and fizzy inside, or is it simply the thought that there is someone who wants his company, who is willing to put up with his moods and his eccentricities and listen to the things he has to say? Will he still feel the same way about Seigi in five years' time, when Seigi has graduated and found a job and gained the self-assurance of an independent man? Will Seigi still want him around when he has women from his office lining up to date him? Will Seigi want him around in six months' time, when he has his share of the inheritance and doesn't need to clean Richard's shop on weekends?

Suddenly gripped with an icy sense of panic, he finds himself wondering if the next few months might be all the time he has left with Seigi. Despite already having prepared himself to cut Seigi out of his life, the thought of Seigi choosing to leave him stirs an inexplicable dread that almost has him unable to breathe.

Desperate for something to pull him out of his thoughts, he looks around and sees Seigi's left hand resting on the car seat. Without allowing any time to second-guess himself, he puts his own hand over it, curling his fingers around Seigi's palm. Seigi doesn't look at him, still listening to Jeffrey talking about things to see near Kensington, but after a moment he turns his hand just enough that he is properly holding Richard's.

Their hands remain clasped until the moment that the driver pulls up outside a row of tall townhouses, and Richard has to let go in order to unfasten his seatbelt. Jeffrey leads them up six stone steps, through the front door, and down a short hall into the ground floor flat, with '76A' in cut brass on the door. He gives them a brief tour of the place, although there's not much to see; a decently sized bedroom with an empty wardrobe and chest of drawers, a bathroom with a shower cubicle (Seigi openly laments the lack of a bathtub), and a kitchenette with a cooker that looks barely used, alongside an open living area with a couch and an armchair. Amid the dove-grey walls, off-white carpets and cream-coloured blinds, the only hint of Jeffrey's personality is an impressive stereo system in the living space, boasting a turntable, two CD decks, and even a minidisc player patched in. Richard is hit with the sudden memory of Jeffrey's small collection of bootleg recordings, smuggled into Claremont Hall from friends and illicit trips to Camden Market, and he has to bite down the smile that threatens to betray him.

"It's basic, I know, but I mostly use it as a crash-pad when I'm working in the city," Jeffrey tells them as he works on separating two keys from his keyring. "I let friends stay occasionally, but anyone who does knows not to come over for the next four weeks."

Richard snorts at the description; even a 'basic' flat like this in Kensington probably costs four or five times what Seigi likely pays in rent.

"I sub-let it sometimes too, to cover some of the costs," Jeffrey says, almost as if reading his mind. "But I'm sure you know what it's like when work takes you all over the place, eh, Ricky?"

"Where are the laundry facilities?" Richard asks, instead of acknowledging him. He's fully aware of how petulant he sounds, but no amount of forced friendliness on Jeffrey's part can make him feel fully comfortable yet.

Jeffrey hands two keys to Richard, who pockets them without a word.

"There's a laundrette not too far away. You can Google anything else you might need, I'm sure. The whole building has wifi - the password is on a card on the stereo."

Seigi slips off his jacket and takes his backpack and Richard's suitcase into the bedroom, leaving

the two of them more or less alone.

“Look, I’m sure you two want some privacy,” Jeffrey says, “so I’ll get out of your hair.”

“That would be very much appreciated.”

His cousin lets out a long sigh. Perhaps Richard could stand to be a little less cold. But it would feel too much like giving in.

“I’ll keep in touch. Mum’s really looking forward to planning a ceremony for the two of you, so I’m sure you’ll hear from her in a couple of days. And Henry’s keen to come down to London to see you again - can you at least say you’ll agree to have lunch with him or something?”

“My aunt can do whatever she pleases in terms of planning a party. It makes little difference to me. As for Henry, I don’t mind having lunch one day, when we’ve settled in. I’m sure Seigi would like that too.”

“Great.” Jeffrey’s smile is wider than it deserves to be. “I don’t want to keep the driver waiting. Feel free to have a copy of the keys made - there’s a Timpson’s not too far away. I’ll call and catch up with you in a few days. Goodbye, Seigi!” he calls as he heads for the door.

Seigi reappears from the bedroom, not quite in time to say goodbye as Jeffrey leaves. As the door closes, Richard lets out a long sigh. He feels like every conversation he’s had lately has ended with a sigh. He is tired, even though he has done very little the past few days, and part of him wants nothing more than to throw himself on the bed and sleep for a week.

But they have things to do. Seigi makes a shopping list, and they find a local Waitrose and buy enough to stock up the fridge and freezer. They divide the chest of drawers, and Seigi unpacks his T-shirts into the bottom drawer while Richard takes the top one for underwear. Then Seigi goes to investigate the stereo, discovering what must be Jeffrey’s music collection in a cupboard, while Richard plugs in his laptop and makes a list of other things they will need to buy; toiletries, cleaning products and rubbish bags, and Seigi will need new clothes since he only ever intended to stay in the country for a couple of days. He also needs to stock up on tea leaves, and it would be a good idea to find places to leave his business card so he can try and pick up some work while he is in the city.

When they have done all they can think of to make the flat livable, they head out to find somewhere for dinner. The flat is close enough to Kensington High Street that they don’t have to walk far to find an impressive choice, and after a brief back-and-forth, they end up at a table for two in an Italian restaurant that Seigi picks. All Richard really wants when they sit down is a slice of cheesecake, or maybe some tiramisu, but when the server brings their menus, his stomach rumbles with surprising force, and he realises that he is incredibly hungry after a long day. So he tells Seigi to order whatever he likes, and they share an antipasti platter while Richard helps Seigi to translate the dishes on the main course menu.

Seigi orders Frutti De Mare, announcing that he wants to try all the different ways to eat fish that are available in England, and Richard smiles and asks if he should start another list. He enjoys seeing Seigi’s eyes widen when his meal is served, and happily listens to him describe the taste of each part of the dish as he works on his own tagliatelle with mussels. When he at last gets to order a dessert, he doesn’t hide his pleasure at the sight of the chocolate cake on his plate, and on a whim asks the server if they can also get two servings of tiramisu to take away; it will keep in the fridge until tomorrow, he reasons, assuming he doesn’t eat it before bed. Over dessert, Seigi asks about what they will do for the next four weeks, and they go over Richard’s tentative plans. Seigi can study in the mornings while Richard makes and takes appointments with clients, and then in the

afternoons they can go shopping, or sight-seeing, and incorporate those trips out with some English lessons. Then there may be time for the occasional theatre trip in the evenings, or walks in the park, or whatever else takes their fancy. Seigi smiles at the prospect, as though it's a holiday; in a way, perhaps it is, for him.

They walk back to the flat under the light of orange street lamps. A couple of times, Richard's hand bumps against Seigi's, and he wonders what might happen if he linked their fingers together again. But there is no way he can excuse it as pretending for the sake of onlookers, so he jams both hands into his pockets and tries to think about something else instead.

Back at the flat, they get ready for bed in companionable quiet, although Seigi still grumbles about the lack of a bathtub. Still a little unused to spending his evenings with someone else around, Richard wonders if he should be keeping up a conversation the whole time. One of his worries about living with Seigi for a full month has been that Seigi will find him dull company, prone to long introspective silences and needing time to himself after social activities. Seigi is often talkative enough for the both of them, but it isn't fair to rely on him to start every conversation.

If Seigi notices anything odd about the quiet in the flat, he doesn't show it. Instead, he takes his things to the bathroom to shower and change, letting Richard have the bedroom to himself to put on his pyjamas. He's already pulling back the covers when it occurs to him that they don't need to share the bed anymore; although there is only one bedroom, there is a couch that looks far more comfortable than the ancient chaise longue back in his room at Claremont Hall.

Seigi returns from the bathroom, his towel-dried hair still a little fluffy, and Richard thrills at the thought of seeing these private little moments of his, just as he does when he notices Seigi's toes curling into the carpet when he stands to put his worn clothes into a laundry basket. He tries not to let himself get caught staring, fussing instead with the lamp on his bedside table.

Almost automatically, Seigi heads to the other side of the bed and turns back the duvet to climb in, with no hint that he objects to sharing the bed again. Richard realises he could probably just climb into bed without saying anything, but that traitorous part of him that insists that Seigi is only in this for the money has to raise its head.

"I can sleep on the couch, you know," he says, picking up a pillow as if to leave.

Seigi's eyes go wide.

"I guess there's no need for you to have to keep sharing your bed," Seigi concedes, although he doesn't sound thrilled about it. "But I should be the one to sleep on the couch."

"Nonsense. You are the one being inconvenienced the most by this whole arrangement. You will have the bed."

He prepares himself for a back-and-forth until one of them agrees to take the bed, but Seigi throws him off when he says, "I don't mind sharing."

Richard's hands clench tightly around the pillow he's still holding.

"This bed isn't quite so big as the one at Claremont Hall."

Seigi sits down on his side of the bed, not looking up at him.

"I know. But—" He picks at the edge of the duvet cover. "Ah, did I tell you, about after you left Tokyo? When I didn't know where you were. I panicked a lot. I thought you might be in trouble. I couldn't sleep sometimes - I had a lot of strange dreams. So being in the same bed, I can fall asleep

each night knowing, *It's okay, he's right there* , and when I wake up in the morning, I can tell myself, *It's okay, he's still there* .”

He wants to stuff the edge of the pillow into his mouth. His chest is constricted, his hands white-knuckled on the pillow.

“Don’t say that.” He means to say, *I didn’t know you’d felt that way, I’m sorry I caused you pain* . But his foolish mouth bypasses it all in hopes of banishing the pain in his heart. Before he can explain himself, Seigi lets out a laugh that sounds not quite comfortable.

“Was that weird? Sorry. I won’t say it again? Should I sleep on the couch?”

Instead of risking whatever might spill out of his mouth next, Richard, slips into bed and pulls the duvet up over his shoulder.

“I’m going to turn off the lamp,” he says, when he is comfortable. Seigi settles into bed next to him, and as usual, he somehow manages to fall asleep within minutes, leaving Richard to lay awake beside him and wonder how on earth he is going to survive the next four weeks.



## Chapter 5

### Chapter Notes

This chapter is as British as dunking a custard cream into a cup of Yorkshire tea.

Some dialogue is inspired by the short story, 'Mr Richard's English Classroom', which is about the first English lesson that Richard gives Seigi after 'Tanzanite'.

I may add some translation notes at the end, for very specific British things that are plot-relevant.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On their first morning alone, Richard wakes up to the smell of tea. The other side of the bed is empty, but there is a gently steaming cup of royal milk tea on Richard's bedside table. He shifts to sit up against the headboard to drink it, thinking that the only thing that could make the morning sweeter would be having Seigi sitting in the bed beside him. But he squashes that thought down quickly; it will not do to start the day off by being maudlin.

Once he is showered and dressed, he finds Seigi in the kitchen, setting the table, with a pan of sausages and eggs sizzling faintly behind him. The toaster pops up just as Seigi notices him, and they both smile at the timing.

"You needn't have gone to all this trouble for me," he tells Seigi, secretly thrilled that Seigi has gone to all this trouble for him.

Over breakfast, Seigi asks about his preferences for breakfasts and lunches, and while Richard loves the thought of eating Seigi's home-cooked food every day, he can't ignore the pang of shame when he realises just how capable Seigi is. There had never been any question of the Claremont boys learning to cook when they were young. Every meal was provided by the kitchen staff, or served in school dining halls and university canteens. When he found himself on his own for the first time in his life, at twenty-four years old, he had never so much as made toast. He got used to filling up on hotel dinners, skipping breakfast and sometimes lunch too, or eating what he could find at convenience stores or street food vendors as he travelled.

The thought of eating someone else's cooking every day feels like a dream, but what can he offer in return? Seigi shouldn't be expected to take care of him like a child, and Richard is determined not to treat him like a kept boy, pampered but shut indoors for the whole month.

"I think we will go out for lunch," he says after they have eaten. Seigi tries to clear his plate, but Richard is at least capable of washing up. He gets up and goes to fill the bowl in the sink, only splashing a little water on his shirt cuff.

"But we just ate out yesterday," Seigi protests, bringing his plate to the sink.

"We will need to go out today anyway, so we may as well make a day of it."

"Well, I'll cook dinner tonight, then."

Richard concedes to this. He wonders if he should offer to help with the cooking, then wonders if

he will only show himself up if Seigi witnesses his lack of cooking skills firsthand.

It's a crisp, clear day outside and the trees that line the streets are shedding their leaves. When Seigi remarks on the colours on display, Richard sees the chance for an impromptu English lesson, and they talk for a while about names for colours and trees. Seigi's English is rather rudimentary for a college student, and his pronunciation veers toward the American, but he seems eager to learn from Richard, repeating the names of the colours and trying out different ways to say, "The foliage looks beautiful at this time of year".

They take the Tube to Covent Garden, to visit a tea specialist so that Richard can order a batch of his particular blend, and he takes the opportunity to leave his business card in some of the jewellery shops and gift shops, before allowing Seigi to linger a while to watch some of the never-ending cycle of street entertainers near the market. Then, they spend a while window-shopping outside some of the finer gentlemen's clothing shops, and Richard entertains a brief fantasy of dressing Seigi in a rather splendid three-piece suit that's in the window of Zebel, before giving himself a mental scolding over such indulgence. Instead, he takes Seigi to Oxford Street and lets him pick out a selection of T-shirts, pullovers and jeans from Burton and TopMan, along with a decent amount of socks and underwear. Along the way, he takes note of Seigi's preference for muted colours and plain fabrics; the thought of Seigi in a suit refuses to die, so he reasons he may as well give it some reasonable consideration; they will need to acquire suits for the civil ceremony in four weeks' time, so perhaps he might get to indulge himself after all.

Seigi marvels at the sheer number of people out shopping on a weekday, and he sticks close to Richard's side on the crowded pavements. It means that they bump elbows and hands repeatedly, and Richard does not shy away from the chance to place a guiding hand on Seigi's back when he needs to steer him in a particular direction. Seigi doesn't seem to mind, and Richard reasons that it's only because he is responsible for taking care of Seigi in a strange and crowded place, and of course he will not keep up the habit when they are away from the city centre.

After buying Seigi some new shoes, they decide to stop for lunch. A quick internet search leads them to Pollen Street Social, where they are welcomed and given a table by the window, with plenty of room for Seigi's bags. After talking Seigi through the menu, Richard encourages him to order for them when the server arrives; he manages to ask for the Chef's Counter Experience for two, with mineral water for Richard, without too much stammering, although Richard suspects that there is still a gap between the way Seigi can speak English to him and the way he can speak with strangers, that can only be eased through practice.

Watching Seigi enjoy his food is as much of a pleasure for Richard as his own meal, and once again he fights back an indulgent daydream of taking Seigi on a gastronomic tour of the city just to watch the way his eyes shine at every new taste. He keeps his imagination in check by teaching Seigi the English names for the foods on his plate, and finds that Seigi is a quick learner when it comes to things he can associate with enjoyable experiences. That, he decides, is worth remembering. If he is to make good on his promise to Hiromi, then he needs to devote real time to planning a tuition schedule for Seigi's English lessons, beyond just teaching him vocabulary here and there.

Before heading back to Kensington, they call into a bank and use the money from Jeffrey to get a prepaid credit card, which Seigi keeps in his wallet, along with a hundred in cash left over. Then, at the station, Richard buys an Oyster card, topped up with another hundred.

"There is more than enough on this credit card to purchase a flight to Tokyo," he tells Seigi as they sit side-by-side on the Tube heading back. "If, at any time during the next month, you change your mind about this arrangement, you can take the Tube to Heathrow, and get on a plane and go home,

and I will accept your decision. You must not think that you are bound to me, or to my family, in any way.”

As expected, Seigi shakes his head.

“I want to be here,” he says. “I want to support you, in any way that I can.”

Richard bites down on a smile as he feels that wonderful warmth surround his heart. He does not deserve such loyalty.

“As long as you understand that you are free to change your mind at any time.”

“I understand. But I won’t.”

Over the next few days, they settle into a routine of sorts. Seigi, always the first to wake up, makes tea and breakfast, and they eat together and clean up together. Mornings are spent on their separate endeavours: Seigi does his best to find and study online materials related to his university classes, while Richard puts out feelers for business in the city, checking in with Saul via e-mail. After lunch, they devote a couple of hours to Seigi’s English tuition, before taking a walk or doing whatever shopping and errands need doing. Then Seigi makes dinner, and Richard cleans the kitchen after they’ve eaten, and they finish the days with books or with whatever videos they can watch online. Richard rediscovers Radio 4, and develops a habit of listening to the evening comedy programmes, and although Seigi can’t always follow along, he doesn’t seem to mind when Richard chuckles away at them.

It’s not the most thrilling time of Richard’s life, but he finds that uneventful days still seem pleasant with Seigi around.

On the fifth day, Richard finally has an appointment set up with a prospective customer who wants to meet in Belgravia. He feels a little uncomfortable leaving Seigi alone in the flat, but Seigi assures him he will be fine, promising to work hard on his English vocabulary while Richard is out.

It feels good to have work to focus on after such a long break, and Richard enjoys taking the time to put on his suit, polish his shoes, and pack his gloves and loupe and camera into his black case. He bids Seigi goodbye, and sets off.

It’s only a couple of miles, but he takes the Tube to Sloane Square, relatively quiet in the early afternoon, and realises halfway there that he is actually smiling. On the short walk through Eaton Square Gardens, he feels the autumn breeze on his face, and resolves to make the most of the day.

His client is a woman who has recently inherited a sizeable collection of jewellery which she wants valued for insurance purposes. At first, the meeting is purely business, but as Richard studies a blue sapphire ring and asks her about its original owner, she begins to warm up, telling him stories about seeing her favourite aunt putting on particular sets of jewellery for different occasions: always sapphires for the theatre, she recounts with a smile, so as not to dazzle when the house lights dim, and always rubies at Christmas, to match the poinsettias on the dinner table. It ends up taking close to two hours to go through the whole collection, by which time Richard has learned more about a deceased aunt than he knows about some of his own relatives.

He leaves her with his business card, and she mentions a nephew who is thinking of proposing to his girlfriend and promises to pass on his name when the subject of rings comes up. Richard smiles

and thanks her, and heads back to Sloane Square feeling better than he has done in quite some time.

It's just turning seven when he lets himself back into the flat. Seigi has the radio on, and Richard realises he's too late for 'Just A Minute'. But then he pauses, in the middle of taking off his shoes, and realises he knows this because he can hear Seigi humming along to the Archers theme tune.

He actually has to stop and lean against the doorframe to keep himself steady, as his breath catches in his chest. He's assumed that Seigi doesn't pay attention to the evening shows he listens to, since they move so fast and tend to be full of peculiarly British humour that probably doesn't translate well. There is no reason for Seigi to have Radio 4 on while he's out. And yet here he is, putting dinner in the oven and listening to Richard's choice of radio station, waiting for him to come home.

If Richard's life really were a novel, this might be the point at which he puts down his bag, strides across the room and takes Seigi in his arms, telling him that Richard finally knows what it's like to come *home*, and asks if Seigi will marry him for real.

In reality, Richard forgets about his shoes, strides across the room and hides himself in the bedroom, hugging Seigi's pillow to his chest and willing himself to keep it together. The need to touch Seigi, to hold him to his chest, rest his head on Seigi's shoulder, aches like something rotten inside him. He will not take advantage of Seigi's good nature like that. He cannot have Seigi thinking that he is obliged to cater to Richard's childish need to be looked after.

When he has calmed down a little, and changed back into more casual clothing, he lets himself out into the living area, where Seigi is setting plates out on the table for dinner.

"Is everything alright?" he asks, his face pinched in obvious concern.

"I'm fine," Richard says. "I was just a little drained - the train was overcrowded on the way back." He passes by Seigi to pour himself a glass of water, staying at the sink with his back to the room until he has drunk it all. Steeling himself, he turns back to Seigi and forces on a smile. "What are we having for dinner?"

Seigi doesn't look entirely convinced by his explanation, but he doesn't push it.

"We had some vegetables that needed using up, so I found a recipe for ratatouille!" He then goes on to list the ingredients in careful English, not complaining when Richard corrects his 'eggplant' with 'aubergine'.

After dinner, they use Richard's laptop to watch an American film with Japanese subtitles. It's a little awkward for two to watch on a small screen, and they have to sit close on the couch. Again, he finds himself thinking about the novel-version of the scene, in which story-Seigi begins to lean a little more against him, as he grows tired, until his head comes to rest on Richard's shoulder, and story-Richard finds the only way to get comfortable is to put his arm around Seigi's shoulders.

Real life-Seigi is too invested in the film's action sequences to grow tired, and ends up leaning forward, elbows on his knees, to pay attention to the subtitles. So Richard has to content himself with enjoying Seigi's excitement, and the way he repeats the English words he recognises under his breath to memorise them. It gives Richard pause to think about the way Seigi's English lessons have progressed these past few days. Thrown into living in England unexpectedly, he really didn't have time to plan out a proper scheme of work, and they've mostly focused on vocabulary that Seigi will need for basic interactions such as buying food, or asking for directions, or describing the things around him.

“Seigi,” he says, during a lull in the onscreen action, “if I were to turn off the subtitles right now, how well do you think you could follow the rest of the film?”

Seigi sits back on the couch, his face thoughtful.

“I mean, I could follow the action easily enough, but when it comes to them explaining who was behind everything, I don’t know about that. Would it be like a test?”

“I realise that perhaps I have been a little remiss in my teaching methods so far,” he says, clasping his hands in his lap.

“No, you’ve been really great!” Seigi insists. “I can talk about the weather, and I could probably ask for everything we ate tonight at the supermarket if I need to.”

He allows himself a small laugh.

“You are doing very well. But what I mean is, I have only focused on the English you might need right now. I have failed to consider the English that you *want* to learn, for the future.”

Seigi looks back at the screen, although he appears to have stopped following the subtitles.

“I guess I want to learn English that will help me get to know people?”

“That is a good start.”

“It would be good to be able to talk to Henry, and get to know him better.”

“When you studied English at school, was anything said about the purposes for studying?”

“They said it would be useful in college, and perhaps in business.”

“So what specific goals were set, to motivate your learning?”

“Goals?” Seigi rubs at the back of his head. “Uh, passing the tests, I guess?”

“I see.”

“Was that wrong?”

Richard sighs, and leans an elbow on the arm of the couch.

“If, instead of pushing you to learn in order to pass a test, your teacher had said, ‘learning English can help you to make new friends’, might that have been any different?”  
He watches as Seigi gives the idea some thought.

“Maybe? I mean, maybe if they’d said, ‘there’s a person coming to class next week who only speaks English’, that would have been a real reason to study hard, to help that person and make them feel welcome.”

Richard nods.

“I think what we need to do, going forward, is to think about why you, specifically, want to learn English. What do you plan to do with this particular language?”

Again, Seigi thinks, and Richard is pleased that he is prepared to give serious consideration to the question.

“I want to connect with people?”

“Good for you.” Richard pushes himself up from the couch, and stretches out his arms a little.

“Please, keep watching the film, if you like. I have a little work to do before bed.”

He finds a notebook among the few personal belongings he has with him at the flat, and sits at the table to start working. There is lots to be done, and he is looking forward to it immensely.

Henry comes down to the city for lunch the following Monday. He brings his mother, who brings a thick notebook labelled ‘Wedding Plans’, which Richard tries hard to ignore. Already, Henry looks noticeably better; his hair has been trimmed and styled, and the worn-out cardigan has been replaced with a navy blazer. He greets Richard and Seigi with a warm smile, and Seigi surprises him by saying, “Thank you for joining us, it’s good to see you again.”

Even as they make small talk about the flat and Richard’s work and how Seigi is finding London, Anna Marie taps her fingers on the cover of her planner, and Richard can see that she is itching to talk about it. She seizes her chance as soon as their appetisers have been cleared from the table, opening the book where her plate was moments before.

“Now, Richard, we simply must start talking wedding plans before the day runs away from us!” The planner is stuffed with magazine cut-outs and business cards, and Richard wonders just how long she has been working on it. “Let’s start with the big picture - it’ll be an autumn wedding, and some might say ‘fall leaves’ is too obvious a theme, but personally I think it’s a classic. Orange, red and gold decorations would work so well with the decor at the house.”

“The house?” Richard shakes his head. “We are having a small civil service at the registry office.”

Anna Marie smiles as though she’s letting him in on a secret.

“Didn’t you know? Your uncle had the house licensed as a wedding venue a couple of years ago. We’ve hosted about half a dozen events since, and it’s nice to see the chapel getting used again.”

“We’re not using the chapel.”

“Well, of course not, darling, I’ve been planning to use the ballroom for your soirée. Much nicer space for a celebration, and not nearly as draughty!”

Richard fights to keep the scowl from his face. Already he can feel the whole thing running away from him. It will be so much harder to keep up his ‘business deal’ approach to the whole thing if he is expected to perform their fake relationship in front of his entire family in a decorated ballroom. He searches for the most tactful way to remind his aunt to keep things simple, but Seigi interrupts.

“We are to marry at Claremont Hall?” he asks, his English showing only the slightest hint of hesitancy.

“Yes, dear!” Anna Marie doesn’t hide her surprise at his understanding. “Won’t that be grand?”

He turns to Richard, and Richard can see his concentration as he works out what he wants to say.

“It could be nice,” he begins, a little unsure of himself in this language he is still getting to grips with, “to make a happy memory at Claremont Hall.”

Trust Seigi to take the optimistic approach. Although Richard does not expect the day to be a happy memory at all, that is the front they're supposed to be putting on for everyone else. The more he thinks about it, the more he warms to the idea of resolving the will that was supposed to demand he marry a traditional English woman by marrying a man from halfway around the world in his family's very own home.

He allows himself a smile for Seigi's sake. Then, feeling daring, he puts his hand over Seigi's on the table-top, his fingers curling around Seigi's palm.

"How right you are. Very well." He turns back to Anna Marie. "We will have the ceremony at Claremont Hall."

He has to let go of Seigi's hand when their main course arrives. As they eat, Anna Marie continues to talk about her plans for the event, pausing only for Richard to translate for Seigi. For the most part, Richard offers no objections to her ideas for colour schemes or chair coverings or music. He can see her growing disappointment and frustration at his lack of input, but it is difficult to feign enthusiasm for the thing he has done everything he can to avoid.

When Seigi excuses himself to the loo after their main course, Anna Marie leans across the table to speak to Richard directly.

"Really, darling, you could try to be a little happier about all of this. It's your wedding, for goodness' sake! What must Seigi think, seeing his fiancée so blasé about the best day of your lives?"

For a brief moment, he considers telling her everything; their relationship is a sham, they're only marrying for the diamond, and Seigi is in love with someone else. Only Henry's interjection keeps him from letting it all out.

"I know Jeff pushed you into this, Ricky," he says, fidgeting with his dessert spoon, "but even so, we want you to enjoy the day, even if it's sooner than you might have wanted it to be."

Anna Marie turns to her son, her brow creased.

"Pushed them into it? Harry, what do you mean? Your brother said Seigi came chasing after Richard all the way from Japan. All he's talked about is how damn romantic the whole thing is." She looks to Richard for some kind of explanation.

"Did you know I only met Seigi six months ago?" he tells her. "Jeffrey was the one who suggested the civil partnership, as a means of securing the inheritance. Seigi still has a year of university left." He watches her face, almost daring her to object to the relationship in light of this.

She purses her lips, and looks between the two Claremont boys for a moment.

"Well, from what I've heard, that boy is smitten with you, and you were devoted enough to try and protect him from your cousin. I know Jeffrey was partly to blame for the way things ended with Deborah, dear, and I know the two of you still have some things to work out between you. But this is our chance to put all that behind us. You two are in love, and it must be special considering all that you're both willing to do for each other. Goodness knows your uncle and I didn't have that long a courtship before he got down on one knee." She taps her fingernails on her planner. "You know, Richard darling, I won't lie - part of me wishes I was doing this for one of my own sons first, but we have to play the hand we're dealt, and I for one want to make the most of this. It's a wedding! This family really needs a good celebration, and this is it. We can celebrate you and Seigi being happy together, and square away that nasty inheritance business, and enjoy some cake at the

end of it all! At least tell me what kind of cake you want, darling, surely you can get excited about that?"

Seigi returns to the table before he can say anything to that, and he has to squash down his anger before it can spill out.

"Cake?" Seigi asks, evidently having overheard the last part of the conversation.

"Your wedding cake, dear," his aunt says, turning her smile on Seigi. "We were just asking Richard what type of cake he wants."

Seigi smiles, and when he speaks again, his English seems to flow so much easier.

"I don't think Richard can choose only one cake!" That odd habit he has of gesticulating wildly when he speaks English is still there, and Richard thinks about taking his hand again just to keep it still, but there is something inviting about Seigi's enthusiasm now that he feels much more able to join in the conversation. "In his shop, he has - Richard, what word?"

He mimes opening and closing a door, so Richard tells him, "Cupboard."

"He has cupboard full of cake! All kinds! Cheesecake, cookie, baumkuchen, macarons! They are for customers, but for Richard too."

Richard keeps his gaze fixed on the table-top, trying to ignore the awful smiles on Henry and Anna Marie's faces as Seigi spills his comfort food secrets far too happily.

"You know," Anna Marie says, "I heard about this wonderful thing where couples have cupcakes on a tiered stand instead of a tiered cake! Wouldn't that be just darling? And then we could have different flavours, and different toppings! You'd like that, wouldn't you, Richard?"

He nods to their server, who comes over immediately. Richard asks to see the dessert menu.

"Seigi, how about you?" his aunt asks. "The English tradition is a fruit cake. Is there a Japanese cake you'd like to have?"

Seigi thinks for a moment.

"I will be happy to see Richard enjoy the cake he likes best."

The menu in Richard's hand creases from how tightly he is holding it. Anna Marie and Henry look at each other, and Anna Marie puts a hand to her mouth. Richard wishes the menu was bigger so he could hide behind it.

"I shall order the Eton Mess," he says to his menu. It distracts Seigi enough that he looks down at his own menu, and Richard gets to spend a while translating for him until he settles on a lemon syllabub.

Over dessert, Anna Marie and Henry take turns asking Seigi about Japanese wedding traditions. As Richard translates where needed, he can't help noticing that Seigi's smile becomes a little more forced, his head dropping a little lower. He insists that he's happy with a British-style wedding, and Richard can't help thinking about Seigi's story about his mother divorcing and remarrying. There is something there, he is certain, that Seigi hasn't revealed to him yet. He wonders if it is something worth asking about later, or if it will come to light of its own accord.

Their dessert serves as a helpful distraction, and Seigi is intrigued by Richard's Eton Mess; when



Richard explains what is in it, Seigi declares that he can probably recreate it quite easily, and Richard can't hide his smile at that thought.

Anna Marie still has questions about music, and photographs, and suits. Richard tells her he will take care of their suits, and that Henry can take responsibility for music, with the caveat of no Wedding March, and perhaps they can include some Japanese food into the menu, as long as they check with Richard and Seigi first. That seems to please her, and she adds notes to her planner with a satisfied smile.

When the car comes to take them back to Claremont Hall, Anna Marie promises to send him fabric samples and a draft of the menu. She keeps talking even as she climbs into the back seat, and just before the driver closes the door, she calls out to Richard, "And do let me know when you've picked out your rings!"

He's too stunned to wave goodbye as the car pulls away, and Seigi has to pull him by the elbow to avoid pedestrians passing by.

Of course they will have to have rings. Which means he will have to take Seigi to some jewellery shop somewhere to look for them, and try them on together. Immediately he thinks back to their little misadventure in a Tokyo department store, and can't help wondering if looking at rings again will finally help Seigi to understand that sales clerk's comment about the Shibuya ordinance. It could be wonderful. Or, knowing Richard's luck, it could be yet another nightmare.

They linger in the area around the restaurant for a while, window-shopping as Richard tries to think about anything except taking Seigi's hand and slipping a gold band on to his finger.

"How was my English?" Seigi asks him, as Richard stops to admire a collection of brooches in the window of an antiques shop. He remembers the surprise on his aunt's face when she realised Seigi had been following the conversation, and tries not to think too hard about what that might mean.

"It's clear that you are improving," he says, noticing the way Seigi smiles at his answer. "You have clearly understood my lesson about the importance of meaning over accuracy. Even if you cannot translate every single word, you showed that you understood what was being said. Good for you."

"It was kind of like watching that movie the other night. If I pay attention to people's expression and voice, that helps me to understand what they want to say. So I can fill in the gaps when I don't understand some words."

"So you see now that English is simply one of many tools that can be utilised in your quest to make connections with people."

They reach Belsize Park station just as it is starting to become busy with late afternoon commuters. They squeeze through to find two seats together in the middle of the carriage, and Richard doesn't hold back a sigh as he settles in for the journey.

"Do we have milk at the flat?" he asks Seigi. It has been far too long since his last cup of tea.

"I went out this morning and bought some while you were still asleep."

"Excellent."

"I'll make tea when we get home."

"Thank you."

“Do you want to know what else I did while you were still asleep?”

“Tell me.”

“Ah, maybe I shouldn’t. It might be better to keep it a surprise.”

“Unacceptable. Do not offer to share information, then rescind the offer a moment later.”

Seigi laughs, and Richard has to bite his tongue to keep from showing his amusement.

“I made pudding.”

God, he loves this man. He falls in love with this man at 3:57pm on the Northern line. Not because he flew halfway around the world for him, and not because he thought about breaking a diamond for him, but because he made pudding for Richard while he was asleep.

Almost giddy with the thought of it, he reaches out and takes Seigi’s hand, and squeezes it quickly, before letting go and clasping his hands in his own lap. Seigi says nothing, and neither does he. Across the aisle, a woman looks at them over the top of her paperback novel, and gives Richard a knowing smile. He smiles back at her, and begins counting down the minutes until they will be home again.

## Chapter End Notes

All of the places mentioned by name are real places in and around London - I have spent a lot of time staring at maps figuring out Underground routes and looking up Richard-suitable restaurants.

A brief note about Kensington, which I probably should have included in chapter 4: Kensington is a very wealthy area of the City of London, close to Buckingham Palace. I stayed there over New Year when I was 10 or 11 - my grandmother was house-sitting for someone and invited my family to stay with her. She was friends with the homeowner's live-in butler and chef, who lived together in the basement-level flat of this enormous four-story townhouse. The family owned race horses, including the horse that won the 1984 Grand National. That's how wealthy an area it is.

Richard listens to Radio 4 in this chapter - this is a BBC radio station which is for spoken-word programmes, not music. They have news programmes and current affairs stuff (not like a phone-in talk radio station), dramas, and every evening at 6.30 there's a comedy programme, followed by the news headlines, then a long-running soap opera called *The Archers*. Even people who've never listened to it can probably hum the theme tune to *The Archers*, it's that iconic.

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Notes

Thank you for being patient during the longer-than-anticipated break between chapters. I had some major work stress last week which kept me from being able to concentrate on anything, but hopefully it's all out of the way now. And I hope this 8k+ chapter makes up for it!

The first half is totally self-indulgent, as Richard and Seigi go gallivanting around London. Then. A lot happens.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Soon enough, Richard has a steady schedule of appointments, taking him across London and the home counties. After the fourth time he comes home to find Seigi preparing dinner and listening to the radio or to one of Jeffrey's CDs, he begins to wonder if it's possible to miss something he never had. That night, in bed, with Seigi asleep beside him, he aches with the memory of all those evenings alone in hotel rooms, all those lonely breakfasts and tables for one and empty beds.

As he spends more time out of the flat, meeting customers and topping up his working stock, he can't help being aware of how much time Seigi is left alone. He has been away from his home for three weeks now, with only Richard for regular company, and with two weeks still to go until the wedding, Richard cannot ignore his part in Seigi's isolation.

"Why not call one of your friends?" he suggests, after an unusually troublesome English lesson. Seigi had become uncharacteristically frustrated over a set of irregular verbs, becoming quieter and reluctant to speak at all beyond the simplest of sentences. So he assumes Seigi will be cheered by the idea, and the thought of talking to a familiar voice.

Instead, Seigi slams a fist on the table, startling Richard enough that he drops his pen.

"It's three in the morning there," he snaps, and grabs at the open page of his notebook, tearing the paper.

"Seigi?"

Seigi puts his hands over his face, and Richard hears him draw a long, slow breath.

"I'm sorry," he says from behind his hands. He rakes his fingers through his hair, then leans back in his chair. "I don't know what's- ah, it's stupid."

Richard reaches out and carefully closes Seigi's notebook, putting it to one side with his own study guide.

"It's not stupid. Your current situation is not an easy one, and you have done well to persevere this long. Do you think that perhaps you are experiencing a degree of homesickness?"

It's somehow both the right and the wrong thing to say. Seigi's eyes squeeze shut, and he covers his face with his hands again. It's painful for Richard to sit there and watch, especially when he understands so well Seigi's isolation. When Seigi's hands begin to drop away from his face,

Richard reaches out and takes one in his own hand. Each time he reaches for Seigi, he tells himself it's just this once, but each time makes it easier to do it again. Seigi doesn't resist, his fingers curling loosely around Richard's as he slumps down in his chair.

"I don't like - when I go out, and I can't - I have to rely on you to read signs and menus, and everyone talks so fast and their accents are all different. I can understand when you speak English, but everyone else - " His face becomes pinched again as he holds back more tears. Richard resists the urge to pull Seigi into his arms.

"I understand," he says, "and it will get easier. We're already more than halfway through the wait period - it's less than two weeks until the ceremony, and then we can return to Japan."

"You're coming too, right?" Seigi looks at him, his eyes wet. Richard nods, and he manages a weak smile. "Can we travel back together?"

"As soon as we are able, I will make arrangements to fly back to Tokyo. In the meantime, why not schedule some calls with your friends? Morning in London is evening in Tokyo, so that could work."

They put away their books, and he cleans up the flat while Seigi sits and sends messages, scheduling calls for the next day. When Seigi goes to bed, Richard sits up in the living room, his laptop open. The idea currently forming in his head will take some research, but he is certain it will be worth it.

When he wakes up the next morning, he can hear Seigi's voice from the next room. He sounds happy, or at least much better than he did the night before, and it makes Richard smile to himself as he sits up in bed. Then, after a brief delay, he hears the voice of a young woman, slightly tinny through the speakers of Seigi's ancient laptop. The famed Tanimoto-san. He has seen her just once, briefly, after he and Seigi watched her friend the dancer perform. He still feels the sting of the memory of how Seigi smiled so brightly at the sight of her, and although it was childish of him, he doesn't regret slipping away so that he didn't have to meet her then. Even now, he can't bring himself to leave the bedroom in case Seigi calls him in to join his video chat with her.

He pulls the blankets back up over his head, and tries to ignore his protesting bladder, until he finally hears Seigi end the call.

When Richard emerges, moving from the bedroom to the bathroom, Seigi calls "Good morning" to him, his voice bright and cheerful. "I'm sorry for my outburst last night. I was frustrated, I guess, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"Already forgotten," Richard says.

"I'll get started on breakfast. Is there anything special you'd like?"

"Nothing too heavy," he answers. "We are going out this morning, so don't fill yourself up on heavy foods."

Before Seigi can ask what he means, Richard slips into the bathroom to shower.

He dresses in casual trousers and a pullover over a collared shirt, and when he joins Seigi in the kitchen, there is muesli and fresh fruit waiting for him.

"Where are we going?" Seigi asks, bringing his own plate of toast to the table. Two cups of tea are already set out, steaming and fresh.

“That would spoil the surprise.” He sips his tea. It’s perfect. The radio is on - Seigi has discovered Classic FM, and tends to keep it on whenever he’s cooking or cleaning, and the morning music is always gentle enough to appease Richard’s sullen tendencies until he has had his first cup of tea. Vaughan Williams plays as Seigi puts butter and jam on his toast, and Richard marvels at this beautiful moment of comfortable domesticity. He has a little less than two weeks left of this, and he really should savour every moment of it.

So of course his masochistic tendencies have to show themselves and ruin the moment.

“You were talking to Tanimoto-san this morning.” He lifts his teacup to his mouth, to hide his frown.

Seigi smiles around a mouthful of toast.

“I sent her a message last night, asking if she’d be free to talk some time today, and then she called me this morning. Or, this evening in Tokyo, I suppose. But it was good to talk to another familiar person again. Ah, I should probably buy some souvenirs for people at home, before we leave.”

Richard pours milk into his bowl of muesli, giving it his full attention for as long as possible.

“You only have to last another two weeks, and then you will be on your way home again. Then you can see your friends as much as you like.”

“I wonder what they’ll think about me being gone so long. And about my English skills having improved so much!”

“You are doing very well,” Richard tells him in English, “and your pronunciation is much improved too.”

“Ah, do you think I’ll ever be able to speak with a real English accent?”

“Do you want to?”

Seigi picks at the crust of his toast, pulling it apart.

“I want to sound like I’m comfortable with English.”

“That will come with practise. The more people you speak to, the more the language will feel familiar to you.”

“Is that what we’re doing today? Going out to practise English?”

“On the contrary. Today is something quite different.”

They take a leisurely walk to Kensington High Street, where Richard leads Seigi into a sporting goods shop. He picks out a pair of swim shorts, and a pair of flip-flops and a towel. From there, it’s a steady walk back via Holland Park to a large building with an exterior that gives little indication of what’s inside. It’s only when they go through the doors and the smell of chlorine hits, that Seigi realises where they are.

“You brought me to a swimming pool?” he asks, confused but excited.

“You can swim if you like,” Richard tells him, “but I brought you here largely because the place also has a spa, with a jacuzzi. It’s not quite the same as a public bath, but I thought you might appreciate it after two weeks with only a shower cubicle.”

Seigi is practically bouncing by his side as Richard purchases a day pass.

“Are you coming too? You didn’t bring any shorts or anything.”

“I will be in the cafeteria, enjoying a slice of cake and a novel. This is for you. Enjoy yourself, and take as much time as you want.”

The truth is, Richard would very much like to go with him. A hot soak would be wonderful, and perhaps a few lengths of the pool - he hasn’t had any real chance to exercise since they moved into the flat. But Richard is certain that he is not yet ready to be around Seigi in such a state of undress just yet. Although they have been sharing a bed and a bathroom for three weeks now, the two of them have managed to be surprisingly, rather sweetly, modest around one another. Seigi is usually up and dressed before Richard wakes up in the morning, and has always managed to be busy when Richard slips from the bathroom back to the bedroom to dress. In the evenings, they take turns to change for bed in the bathroom, and Richard has never seen Seigi anything less than fully covered.

During their cohabitation, Seigi has at least managed to keep his comments about Richard’s looks to a minimum. Given that he has by now seen Richard’s morning bed-head, it’s possible that his infatuation is fading, which at least makes things a little easier on Richard’s treacherous heart. If he were to appear in front of Seigi in just a pair of swimming trunks, or with only a towel for modesty, he is not sure he could handle whatever Seigi’s impulsive mouth might come up with, especially not with other people around.

Thankfully, Seigi isn’t too disappointed, heading off to the changing rooms with a smile on his face. Richard takes one of the spa price guides from the reception desk, and heads off to find the cafeteria.

He settles in at a table next to a potted fern, and opens his book.

Five chapters, two scones and one slice of cake later, Seigi returns, his hair still damp and his cheeks ruddy. He flops into the empty chair at Richard’s table, and lets out a long breath.

“That was wonderful!” he says, and the contentment is evident in his voice. “I went for the jacuzzi first, and it was so good to sit and soak, but I had so much energy I ended up going for a swim. Then I went back to the jacuzzi again, but I saw the sauna, and then after that there was a cold water pool, and then I had to take another dip in the jacuzzi. I’m sorry, Richard, but I think I’m too relaxed to make lunch now.” He ducks his head, which means he doesn’t see the way Richard smiles at him.

“That’s quite alright, since I had planned to take you out for lunch anyway.” Seigi looks up at him, as though he still can’t believe Richard is willing to do more for him. “I’m glad you had a good time. Since you know how to get here, you can come back any time while we’re in Kensington. Just buy a day pass at reception, and you can use the pool and spa facilities for as long as you like.”

“Ah, you should come with me next time,” he says, leaning across the table and touching Richard’s forearm. Richard can’t help but look down at his hand; these little touches seem to be becoming more frequent between them. “Wait - on second thought, maybe not? I don’t know if I can handle seeing you in swim shorts. That might be too much beauty even for me.”

He is thankful that the people at the next table likely can’t understand what Seigi is saying, and that he opted not to join Seigi in the spa today.

“I will chalk that remark up to your overly relaxed state. But in future, please remember what I have said about such careless remarks.”

“Sorry. But thank you for today. I really appreciate it.”

As they walk back towards Kensington High Street, Richard can smell the chlorine on Seigi’s skin. He tries to ignore the mental image of Seigi splashing around in the pool in his trunks, his hair wet and messy and his smile wide. He focuses his attention instead on his surroundings, talking to Seigi about architecture and green city spaces, until they reach a street of cafés and shops. There, he takes Seigi to a well-lit restaurant, where the server brings them a menu written in both English and Japanese.

“I wasn’t sure whether you’d actually want to eat somewhere like this while we were here, but I thought you might appreciate having a day off from reading English,” he explains, as Seigi’s eyes light up. He lets Seigi order for the both of them, happily chatting with the server in Japanese. Over the course of the meal, Seigi learns that their server is on a year-abroad study programme at King’s College, working part-time for a little extra money. When asked if he’s doing the same, Seigi ducks his head and says he’s taking a year out for a business project, introducing Richard as his employer.

“It feels a little strange to say to someone that you’re my fiancée,” he explains, when they are alone at their table. “Was that wrong?”

“Not at all,” Richard says. “It hardly matters. Unless you plan on inviting our server to the wedding.”

After lunch, they take the Tube to Leicester Square, and Richard leads Seigi through the crowds of tourists, past the theatres and the steak and burger restaurants, to a side-street covered over with rows and rows of red paper lanterns. The bakery he is heading for is owned by a Chinese family, but their shelf stock comes from all over east Asia, and he is relieved to see Seigi’s eyes light up at the sight of red bean buns, boxes of mochi, and rows of Ramune in the chilled drinks cabinet.

“So even on the other side of the world, there are things from Japan,” he marvels, before happily filling his arms up with boxes of treats to take back to the flat. Afterwards, Richard briefly wonders whether the final part of his plan might be overkill, but decides the best thing to do is ask. When he tells Seigi about the Japan Centre, just a few streets away, Seigi once again looks on the verge of bouncing up and down on his feet.

They end up spending over an hour at the Japan Centre, as Seigi browses the food hall, his eyes alight each time he spots something familiar. Richard had been half-convinced that bringing him here would be silly, or might even make him feel worse, reminded of all the things he’s been missing since leaving home, but Seigi laughs at the sight of so many Japanese brands in an English city. He only grumbles that Richard won’t let him buy any kitchen equipment, pointing out that they won’t be able to take it back to Tokyo with them and Jeffrey will probably have little use for it if they leave it behind.

They leave with a bag full of food from the deli counter and some magazines, and Seigi promises to cook something wonderful for dinner, and Richard is thankful that his plan has worked out for the best.

Seigi is definitely more cheerful for the next few days, even with Richard heading out to meet with clients. It helps to remember that, as Richard’s phone is increasingly bombarded with messages from his aunt about wedding plans, which he would really rather not think about.

Eventually, he concedes to her reminders about suits, with just one week to go until the ceremony. He and Seigi take the Tube to Covent Garden, to visit one of the gentlemen’s outfitters they’d passed on their first trip there. As expected, Seigi is entranced by everything in the shop, and

Richard is thankful that it takes a while for the staff to get to them, since it gives Seigi time to get the excitement out of his system.

The staff member who greets them is a little older than Richard, dressed in green tweed trousers and a matching waistcoat, with his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Richard notes with admiration the man's two-tone brogues and the gold watch-chain hanging from the button on his waistcoat, and feels assured that they will receive the kind of service he is hoping for.

"How can I help you two gents today?" he asks, looking from Richard to Seigi with a smile.

"My companion and I are attending a wedding together," Richard says, "and would like something suitable. Not matching, but-"

"Co-ordinated?" Richard nods. "Understood. You want to let people know you're there together." He looks again from Richard to Seigi a few times, as if making a decision. "Does this event have a colour scheme?"

"Autumn leaves," Richard tells him, unable to keep the disdain from his voice. The sales clerk smiles.

"So, copper, burnished gold, burnt orange? That sort of palette?" Again, Richard nods, thankful that the man seems to have a keen sense of style.

"I would like my companion's suit to be something he can wear for other occasions afterwards. Nothing too ostentatious."

The man nods, and leads them over to a rail of shirts in every conceivable colour.

"We can match your shirts and ties to your colour scheme, for something bright and eye-catching, and keep your jackets and trousers fairly neutral. How does that sound?"

"Perfect."

The man pulls a couple of shirts off the rail and holds them up in front of Seigi, then Richard. The two of them stand patiently as he makes his selections, adding neckties, then waistcoats, giving each of them a small collection to carry. Next, he moves over to the winter suits, his face pinched in concentration.

Eventually he directs them to the changing rooms, and they slip into separate cubicles. Richard's options are not necessarily what he might have chosen himself, preferring as he does the cooler end of the colour spectrum, and certainly not something he might expect to see a groom wear to his wedding, but he can see how the outfit is meant to come together and work with his aunt's colour scheme, and he feels he can trust the sales clerk's judgement.

A couple of minutes later, he steps out of the changing room. The clerk is over by the counter, with a tape measure slung around his neck as he busies himself with an arrangement of bow-ties, and he gives Richard an approving smile. Before he can say anything though, the door to the other changing room opens and Seigi pokes his head out. He seems a little uncertain, but smiles when he sees Richard, and opens the door all the way.

He's had his suspicions, but now they are confirmed without a doubt: Seigi looks *good* in a suit. Mature, put together in a sophisticated way that his jeans and T-shirts can never manage.

Aware that he is staring, Richard searches for something to say.



“Who taught you how to tie a tie?”

It’s entirely the wrong thing, and he curses himself for saying it, but his treacherous hands reach out of their own accord, unfastening the loose knot of Seigi’s tie and reworking it into a smart half-Windsor. Seigi is quiet throughout, no doubt embarrassed by Richard’s criticism, and remains stiff and upright until he is finished. Richard puts his hands on Seigi’s shoulders and turns him to face the mirror, and then his breath is truly taken away.

Side by side, they are, without a doubt, a couple. The rich mahogany brown of Seigi’s three-piece suit complements the lighter tan that Richard wears. They have matching shirts in a muted orange shade, and ties a shade warmer than Seigi’s jacket. Separately, the items wouldn’t look anything special, but somehow their sales clerk has pulled together two outfits that not only fit his aunt’s colour scheme but also work perfectly together, signalling to anyone looking that they are undoubtedly meant to be together.

Richard runs his hands over Seigi’s shoulders and down his arms, smoothing out invisible wrinkles in the jacket. The image of the two of them on the morning of the ceremony springs to mind, unbidden, and he wonders if Seigi will ask him to tie his tie again. He stamps it down before he can warm to it too much.

In the mirror, Seigi meets his eyes. His face is hard to read, and Richard hopes it doesn’t mean that he hates what he’s wearing.

“What do you think?” he asks, trying to keep his voice light. “Does the jacket feel comfortable?”

“I guess? It’s not *un* comfortable.” He fastens the jacket over the waistcoat and turns from side to side, watching himself in the mirror. “We do go together.” He holds his arm in line with Richard’s, looking at the contrast between the two shades of their jackets. Briefly, Richard thinks about taking his hand. But they are in public this time, and even though Richard has an inkling that their sales clerk won’t mind at all, he doesn’t want to make Seigi feel uncomfortable. It becomes another thing to squash down, back into the recesses of his treacherous mind.

“How are we getting along, gents?” The sales clerk comes back over, looking between the two of them. Richard feels pleased that he has the good manners to speak to both of them, instead of just defaulting to Richard, as if Seigi cannot understand a word.

“You have a keen eye for colour,” Richard tells him. “It’s not a palette I would have chosen myself, but your selections work well.”

“I like the shirt colour,” Seigi adds, adjusting his collar a little. “We match, a little, but not too much.” At that, Richard can’t help putting his hand on Seigi’s back, giving him a gentle pat between his shoulder blades. His understanding of English is coming along wonderfully, and Richard couldn’t be prouder of how much more at ease he is when he talks to others now. Seigi meets his eyes in the mirror, just for a moment, before looking away.

“I’m glad you’re both happy. Will we need to make any adjustments?”

They stand for the sales clerk to check the fit of their jackets, and Seigi looks briefly alarmed to see the clerk marking Richard’s suit with tailor’s chalk, until Richard assures him it’s only temporary. Everything gets rung through the till, and the clerk generously adds in two belts and two pocket squares to match their shirts, at no extra cost, and they leave the shop with an appointment card to collect their suits in a couple of days.

A few doors further along the same street, they find a shoe shop, and pick out matching brown

leather Oxfords. Seigi carries the smart bags with the shop's logo embossed in gold, and Richard daydreams about taking him shopping in Ginza when they return in a few days' time, kitting him out with a wardrobe of three-piece suits and stylish shoes.

After a leisurely lunch, they have appointments to get their hair cut, and Richard watches the barber show Seigi how to use pomade to turn his simple style into something a little more sophisticated.

When they leave the salon and walk down the street, Richard finds himself battling a sudden and strange sense of unease, which he cannot quite place. Something feels off. He sticks close to Seigi, watching over his shoulder, although he cannot say what for.

They have one final item on their to-do list, and it is the one thing Richard has been putting off as long as possible.

He takes Seigi to a jeweller's in the Hatton Garden gem quarter of the city. It's a region he hasn't had chance to explore for years, and it stings him that this is what allows him his chance to return. Each time his aunt has reminded him that he needs to buy wedding rings, he's considered simply picking up an Argos catalogue and buying the cheapest gold bands they have just to spite her. But every single aspect of his ceremony is going to come under scrutiny from the most observant members of his extended family, and 9 karat gold bands could likely prove even more scandalous than the youngest of the Claremont boys marrying a man.

The staff behind the counter are all instantly alert the second the two of them walk in together, and he can't help but remember Seigi dragging him to a department store jewellery counter just a few months ago. Thankfully, when he asks to see men's wedding bands, all but the gentleman serving them back off, although he is very aware that they are still watching him as he and Seigi study the selection of rings they have been presented.

"Ah, I guess men's wedding rings don't really have gems," Seigi says. The disappointment in his voice is only light, and Richard hopes it means that Seigi was merely looking forward to seeing some gems, rather than being expected to be given one.

"True. The wedding ring has a different sort of symbolism than an engagement ring, and surprisingly a less materialistic one. Some say the circle is meant to represent eternity. And it is less common for men to wear wedding rings than women."

They spend a while poring over the selection, the decision proving rather more difficult than Richard had expected. The yellow-gold bands that look warm and rich on Seigi's hand end up looking brassy on him, and the white-gold and platinum that suit his cooler skin tone look plain, even cheap, on Seigi.

"If I may, sirs," the jeweller on the other side of the counter interjects, "you do not have to choose rings that are exactly the same. It is perfectly acceptable to choose rings that suit each of you individually. We do have other men's rings which are not strictly wedding bands, but which you may find more appealing."

He brings out a second tray from under the counter, this time of rings of a much broader range of styles. Seigi runs a hand along the edge of the tray, eventually stopping at a ring with two different metals. A thin gold band is sandwiched between two wider titanium bands. He hands it to Richard, who slips it on to his own ring finger. Seeing their selection, the jeweller picks up another ring from the same tray and offers it to Seigi; like their suits, it is a complementary style, warm gold bands with a slim platinum band in the middle. Although not made that way, when seen together, they look like they are meant to be a set.

Seigi puts the ring on to his own left hand, and holds it out close to Richard's. In just a few days' time, he is going to put that ring back on to Seigi's hand. He can see the moment in his head, in perfect clarity. It makes his breath catch in his throat.

"Do we have a winner?" The jeweller looks between the two of them, waiting for an answer.

"These two." Richard takes off his ring and hands it over, and Seigi follows suit.

After measuring their ring sizes, the jeweller comes back with two ring boxes, showing the two designs in appropriate sizes, before ringing them up at the till. As Richard takes out his credit card, he assures himself that, whatever happens after the ceremony, at least Seigi will have something of value that he can sell or exchange if the two of them end up parting ways.

Back out on the street, Richard realises that uneasy feeling is back again. He pauses beside the door to the jewellery shop, his hand on Seigi's arm to keep him from wandering off.

"What's wrong?" Seigi asks, his voice low, evidently sensing that something is not quite right.

Richard looks around, before turning his head to whisper into Seigi's ear.

"Stay close beside me, and keep looking straight ahead as we walk."

They set off down the street, heading for the nearest Tube station, where the busy crowds. To his credit, Seigi does as asked, not saying a word until they find seats on the train.

Richard looks around, and finally breathes a sigh of relief.

"We were being followed," he explains, still keeping his voice low. Seigi looks alarmed.

"Paparazzi, probably."

"Why?"

"Because a member of the English aristocracy is getting married, and to a man at that, and some people consider that news-worthy, even though it is of no concern to them."

Seigi is quiet for the rest of the afternoon; Richard gives him a little space, and although Seigi doesn't say anything about it, it is clear that he is worried.

Sure enough, the next afternoon, he gets a call from Jeffrey.

"I see you got papped, Ricky." Jeffrey sounds far more pleased about it than he ought to, and Richard wishes Jeffrey were there to see the pointed glare on his face. "It's on one of the gossip sites today, and you'll probably be in the next edition of 'Hello'. Shouldn't worry too much about it - just photos of you and Nakata-kun out shopping. But from the looks of it, someone at the registry office leaked that a Claremont had registered intent to marry."

"You sound far too happy about it. What if someone Seigi knows should happen to see the news online?"

"This sort of gossip is nothing out of the ordinary for us," Jeffrey says. "Well, for me, at least. I suppose you have managed to escape it for the past few years. Living under the radar as you have, it's understandable that you're not used to being photographed every time you go out in public. I shouldn't worry too much about it - they'll have moved on to something else in a couple of days."

"It's not me I'm worried for."

“Relax, Ricky. Nakata-kun is an unknown. They won’t be able to find out anything about him.” There’s a slight delay on the line, which catches Richard’s attention.

“Where are you?”

Another pause, this time a little longer.

“Ah, New York, today. Just taking care of a little personal business. I’ll be back home in plenty of time for the wedding, don’t worry.”

“Don’t hurry back on my account.”

Richard hangs up before Jeffrey can say anything else.

A quick internet search of his own name brings up the website Jeffrey mentioned. There are photos of himself and Seigi outside the jeweller’s in Hatton Garden; Seigi smiling brightly, shopping bags in both hands, and himself, smiling at Seigi, his hand on Seigi’s back as he steers him toward the shop. Another picture, this time the two of them leaving the shop, with the small jeweller’s bag in Richard’s hand.

The accompanying text names him as “Richard Claremont, younger cousin of socialite Jeffrey Claremont and nephew of the ninth Earl Claremont”. There is melodramatic speculation about him being seen “stepping out with a young Japanese man”, and implications that he has been out of the country for the past four years due to his family being “uncomfortable with his sexuality”. He holds back a disdainful laugh as he reads it.

*‘Could it be that the Claremont family have finally accepted their prodigal nephew back home? Or has he simply brought his new beau home to take advantage of the UK’s civil partnership laws since Japan still doesn’t allow same-sex weddings?’*

He wonders whether to keep the news from Seigi; after all, the text isn’t exactly negative, and doesn’t mention Seigi by name. But Seigi has been a little subdued since their trip out, and Richard has learned his lesson when it comes to hiding things from him. He shows the pictures to Seigi after dinner, and translates the text, explaining that the speculation is largely about Richard, linking him to Jeffrey and the Claremonts. Seig says he is fine with it, but Richard can tell that his smile is not entirely genuine.

With three days to go before the ceremony, they spend an afternoon cleaning the flat and packing up their belongings, ready to return to Claremont Hall. Seigi cooks dinner, using up most of the food in the kitchen save for what they will need for breakfast, and they share a bottle of wine, since Richard is feeling a little indulgent; it may well be the last peaceful evening they can enjoy together.

Unlike in his daydreams, Seigi is still relatively sober as they get ready for bed, showing no ill effects after drinking, and unusually quiet. Once the lights are out, Richard waits for Seigi to fall asleep quickly, as he usually does. But Seigi is restless, adjusting his pillow and pulling the duvet up, then down, unable to settle.

“Seigi?” They’ve never really talked in bed, and he keeps his voice low without even thinking about it, as though this is somehow more private than any conversation they’ve had in other rooms of the flat. “Is something on your mind?”

He hears Seigi’s intake of breath, as though he’s been caught out somehow.

“Don’t worry about it,” Seigi whispers back. “I just can’t sleep, that’s all.”

“If you’re worried about the photos, you needn’t. The focus was more about me, as a member of the Claremont family, and such gossip tends to pass quickly in those sorts of circles.”

“It’s not that.” Seigi turns on to his back, and Richard can just see the outline of his profile in the darkness. “The ceremony is just a few days away now.”

“Are you feeling nervous?”

“I think it’s more... When Jeffrey suggested the idea, I wasn’t really thinking about the reality of it? I think, I just thought we’d sign some papers. Not have a big ceremony with guests and rings and everything.”

“I had hoped we would do without all that too.”

“Do you have a big family? Will there be lots of people at the ceremony?”

If Seigi is worried about being the centre of attention at a large gathering, that at least is not too troublesome to deal with.

“I don’t know precisely who my aunt has invited. We’re not a terribly large family, and even before I left I didn’t see our extended family all that often. I wouldn’t worry about there being too many people there.”

He hears Seigi draw a slow breath.

“Your aunt said there hasn’t been a family wedding for a long time. That everyone was looking forward to this one.”

“I’m sorry if her plans have made you anxious. If it helps, a civil ceremony shouldn’t last too long. Church weddings tend to go on - there would be hymns, and readings, and such - but since we’re having a secular service, that should keep things simple.”

“But your family will want to know about me. They’ll see you, in your new suit, looking as beautiful as you always do, and then...they’ll see me. A student, with a part-time job, standing beside a man who’s made something of his own life, who runs a business, and speaks more languages than I can name.”

“Seigi?”

“I just don’t want your family to think badly of you for choosing someone like me. Or because they think you chose someone like me.”

“Seigi. The opinions of distant relatives I haven’t seen in years and might not see again don’t matter to me, and they shouldn’t matter to you.”

“It’s just - when we went to buy suits, and I saw myself standing next to you in the mirror. I thought, do I really deserve to be next to this man? To tell his family that he chose me? Even if it’s just a lie.”

Richard turns and leans on his elbow. With his eyes becoming adjusted to the darkness, he can see Seigi’s eyes are closed.

“Seigi, please listen to me. My job doesn’t make me a better person than you. Neither does my family’s status. No matter if it’s just for a day, and just for a lie, you are worthy of being by my side.” *Oh god, is this it?* he thinks, feeling his heart rate quicken. *Is this how I tell him? In bed, in*

*the dark?* “Remember that you put yourself on the line for me when I was just a stranger to you. You came half way around the world to find me when you thought I might be in trouble. No one else has ever-” In the dark, it might be easier to say it. He searches for the words, for a way to tell Seigi how much his heart swells when he thinks about all that Seigi has done for him. “I’m grateful to have you by my side.”

He hears a small huff of laughter, and Seigi’s hands move to cover his face.

“I’ll remember that,” Seigi says, “when the ceremony begins.” He lowers his hands, and shifts in the bed to look up at Richard. “When you were engaged before, did that person worry the same thing?”

And just like that, Richard feels the words slipping away from him. Seigi and his foolish mouth. Does he ever stop to think about the effect of his words?

Richard settles back into the bed, looking up at the ceiling.

“I don’t think we ever got as far as planning a ceremony,” he confesses. “I didn’t even give her an engagement ring.”

“Can I ask her name?”

Her face comes to Richard’s mind, smiling in that way that said she saw through all of his aloofness to the faltering, frightened boy who barely knew how to make friends with anyone.

“Deborah.”

“Deborah? What happened to her? After the engagement ended?”

“We kept in touch,” he says, “and we still do. Letters, and e-mails.” How long has it been since he last talked to her? He let her know he was back in England, but he certainly hasn’t said anything to her about Seigi’s arrival. What would she say, if she found out about his engagement? Would she be disappointed in him, for giving in to his family?

Seigi is quiet for a moment, and Richard wonders if he might have fallen asleep at last.

“I’m glad,” he whispers, almost startling Richard. “If she was special to you back then, I’m glad she’s still in your life.”

He doesn’t know how to respond to that.

“Goodnight, Richard.” Seigi turns over, facing away from him.

“Goodnight, Seigi.”

A car arrives, not long after breakfast, to take them back to Claremont Hall. Jeffrey is not there, still out of the country apparently, and the journey away from London is relatively subdued. Seigi has a bag of souvenirs to take home with him, which he looks at fondly from time to time. Perhaps, Richard suspects, he is thinking of his return to Japan, just a few days away now, and of the faces of his friends and family when he delivers their gifts.

Although Richard too is looking forward to returning to Ginza, the only one waiting for him there is Saul. Richard has no souvenirs for him, since he knows all that Saul wants is for him to return to

his business. He tries not to think about coming home to the smell of dinner and the Archers theme tune. It was nice, while it lasted.

Henry and his aunt are by the main staircase when they return. Anna Marie has flowers in one hand, and her wedding planner notebook in the other.

“Richard, darling, tell me what you think of these?” she calls, by way of a greeting. “I think birds of paradise would look stunning with your colour scheme, but Henry says they’re a bit too summery for ‘autumn leaves’.” She holds the flowers out towards him.

Richard sneezes.

“Oh darling, don’t tell me you’re allergic?” She puts the flowers down on the bottom step and bustles him away as he pulls his handkerchief from his pocket. Somewhere a few feet away, Seigi is laughing at him.

“Do you mind if, perhaps, we can put our things away before we start talking about flowers?” he asks, pointedly ignoring Seigi and Henry, who are both still chuckling together.

“Of course, Richard, what was I thinking? The two of you should go get settled in, and then why don’t you meet us in the drawing room in half an hour? I’ll have tea sent in.”

They head upstairs, their luggage having already been sent up ahead of them. Seigi puts his bag of souvenirs down on the desk and goes over to the window. It’s grey and overcast outside, and the sprawling gardens and fields look decidedly empty without the sun shining down on them.

“You don’t have to come with me, if you find the planning dull,” he says to Seigi as he hangs up his coat. Feel free to stay up here, or take a walk.”

“I don’t mind.” Seigi slips off his own jacket, and hangs it up beside Richard’s coat. “Maybe I can help, if you find it troublesome. I don’t know much about flowers, but I can try.”

He can’t help but smile at that. They linger a while, unpacking what they will need for the next couple of days and hanging up their wedding suits to air out, before eventually heading back down the main staircase.

Anna Marie has set herself up at a large table in the drawing room, with a tablet computer and her planner, now noticeably thicker with all the papers and pictures stuffed into it.

“Most things are taken care of,” she says, before they can even sit down. “The registrar, the photographer, the catering. Seigi, dear, I hope you don’t have any allergies - there’ll be shellfish, and cheese, and definitely walnuts. What we absolutely must make a decision about today, though, is music.”

It takes a solid half hour to finalise a suitable selection of music. Richard refuses to include the Wedding March, and Anna Marie is practically apoplectic when he says neither of them will be walking down the aisle, but he concedes to Bach’s cello suite for the opening of the ceremony, and apparently the string quartet can do a rendition of Etta James’ ‘At Last’ for after the vows, which only Anna Marie finds funny.

She talks them through her decorations, and they talk about the best places for photographs afterwards. Richard perks up a little when the talk turns to the wedding cake, although Anna Marie is mostly concerned with how the confectioners have matched the fondant decorations to her colour scheme, making a cascade of falling leaves down the three tiers with hints of edible gold leaf.

“In the end, we went with a fruitcake base, vanilla sponge for the middle tier and chocolate for the top - that way there’ll be something for everyone.”

“Perhaps Richard can have a slice of all three?” Seigi suggests, which of course has Anna Marie and Henry almost clutching their sides with laughter.

They end up having lunch sent in, and talk over Anna Marie’s choices for food (and explaining to Seigi that a ‘wedding breakfast’ means the afternoon meal, which disappoints him just a little). As they finish eating, one of the staff knocks on the door, and Anna Marie is called away to deal with something wedding-related in the ballroom. Richard suspects that he ought to feel guilty for all the work she has done for the event while they have been in Kensington, ‘playing house’ as Saul put it. But his memories of the past month with Seigi are enough to keep him from worrying too much over it.

Godfrey comes to find them shortly after, and they follow him up to his study while Henry heads off to the library. Richard would really rather take a break, but Godfrey insists it’s just a little paperwork to do with the inheritance and will “only take a mo”, so they take their seats around his desk as he pulls out an envelope and spreads papers out for them to see.

“All just a formality, really,” he says, as he takes two pens from a wooden stand and hands one to each of them. “Just about making sure everyone’s appropriately taken care of after the wedding. Or civil partnership. Don’t know what terminology you chaps prefer. Just need you both to sign on the dotted line, then you can head off and relax for the rest of the afternoon.”

Richard picks up his own little stack of papers. It’s turned to the last page, where there is space for three sets of signatures. Godfrey’s name is already signed at the bottom.

Suspicious, he turns the stack over, leafing through to find page one.

“Seigi, don’t sign it.”

Seigi already has his pen over the line on his copy, but thankfully hasn’t made a mark.

“Come on now, Ricky, it’s all standard, nothing to lose sleep over.”

“This is a prenuptial agreement.” He scans the document quickly, looking for specifics. “It says that in the event of a separation, that...” He runs a finger down the side of the page, looking for numbers. “That Seigi is entitled to practically nothing?”

“Richard, you know how things are with families like ours.” Godfrey leans across the desk. His voice sounds genial, but his face is stern. “We have to do things a little differently, for the sake of the estate.”

Richard takes a long, steadying breath.

“Seigi, would you please excuse us?”

Seigi nods, and sets his pen down, before hurrying out of the room. Richard waits until the door is closed, then stands, looking down at his uncle.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t take the time to read it? Did you honestly think that after what happened with Deborah, that I would trust any of you to not interfere with my relationships?”

Godfrey begins pulling the papers on the desk towards him, stacking everything back into one pile.



“If you want me to rework it, I can. We can work out some sort of settlement as a ‘just in case’.”

“I will not sign any such agreement. If that is a problem for you, then you can tell my aunt that the wedding is off, and I will book the first available flight to Tokyo.” He turns, as if to leave.

“Just hold on a minute!” Godfrey hurries around to the other side of the desk. Richard doesn’t turn back, but doesn’t walk away just yet. “Richard, just think about this for a moment. He’s a student, who had to take a part-time job just to get by during his studies, and now he’s marrying into the aristocracy? We all want the best for the two of you, but we have to be realistic about these things.”

“I will book the first available flight to Tokyo, and you and Jeffrey will compensate Seigi and myself for our lost income during the past month.” He takes three steps towards the door.

“Alright, you’ve made your point! No pre-nup!”

Richard pauses, and turns back to his uncle.

“But listen to me, Richard. Should the worst happen, any claim that young man makes is on you and you alone. I will not have the Claremont name dragged through the divorce courts, or whatever the hell your equivalent is.”

Richard laughs. He can’t help it. It’s a nasty, ugly sort of a laugh, but it feels perfectly right.

“You know, just last night, Seigi told me that he was worried about the ceremony. That my family might think poorly of him and question my choice to want someone like him by my side. If only he knew the truth, that he is worth far more than my family name.”

He turns, again, and leaves the study.

Seigi is waiting for him, up in his room, on the chaise longue. Richard goes to sit beside him.

“I’d have signed it,” Seigi says, not looking at him. “I don’t mind. I’m not doing this for your family’s money.”

It feels almost like habit when Richard reaches out and takes Seigi’s hand in his own.

“This time next week, we will be back in Ginza,” he says, giving Seigi’s hand a squeeze. “Will you come back to work, that first weekend?”

“Of course!”

“We will need to restock the kitchen. Perhaps you could come by on the Friday, and we can go shopping?”

“Yes, boss!”

Godfrey does not come down to dinner that evening. Anna Marie doesn’t say why, and Henry doesn’t ask. They mention that Jeffrey is expected back the next day, and then Henry and Anna Marie take turns telling stories about the relatives who are coming for the ceremony, recalling fond memories of past family gatherings. Richard lets it all wash over him, doing his best to focus on his food, and on Seigi, who is doing his best to follow the conversation and interject with questions when he can.

They turn in early, and Richard sits up in bed with a book while Seigi sends messages to his friends at home, until they are both yawning and have to turn off the lights.

It's just the two of them at breakfast. Seigi, at least, seems well rested, although Richard is suffering from a restless night and from getting out of bed earlier than he'd like. They take a walk outside, and then while away the rest of the morning in the library.

A little before midday, there's some commotion from downstairs - Richard hears staff bustling about in the hallway, and gives in to temptation by sticking his head out to see what's going on. When he hears mention of visitors, he considers hiding himself in the furthest corner of the library, not yet ready to deal with whichever distant relatives have turned up a day early for the ceremony. But then he hears Jeffrey's voice, carrying all the way from the entrance, as it tends to do when he's excited about something. And he realises that Jeffrey is speaking Japanese.

He looks back to Seigi, who puts down his book and gets up to follow him out into the hall and down the stairs. Richard's heart quickens when he spots Jeffrey, who is alternately directing the staff to take a suitcase upstairs and speaking in Japanese to a woman with dark hair in a neat bun, who stands with her back to the staircase.

He almost falls down the stairs in his hurry, only just keeping his balance with a hand on the banister. When he reaches the bottom step, the woman turns to him. His stomach drops.

*It's not her.*

Seigi comes to a stop right beside him, bumping his shoulder, almost out of breath.

“Hiromi?”

## Chapter End Notes

When Richard says/remembers he's seen Tanimoto-san just once, this comes at the end of the volume 2 story, 'Emerald's Dance' (or is it called 'Dancing Emeralds'? I'm sure I've seen both). Seigi sees Tanimoto outside after watching a dance performance, and when he turns to introduce Richard, the man has slipped away into the night.

## Chapter 7

### Chapter Notes

Chapter 7 was originally going to include the civil partnership ceremony, but some extra conversations snuck in here that weren't in my earlier draft, and this felt like a natural place to pause for a break. Plus I didn't want to keep waiting any longer - I've had some unexpected major work stress the past couple of weeks, hence the delay.

“Seigi, I think we have some catching up to do.”

Even if Richard couldn't recognise her voice from their telephone call a month ago, it's obvious from the look on her face that the woman by the door is Seigi's mother. Only a parent could look at a young man with so much fondness and frustration at the same time.

Richard turns to his cousin, ready to unleash his anger at yet more meddling, but Jeffrey cuts him off.

“How'd you like my little surprise, Nakata-kun? You know, if you'd asked, we could have invited more of your family.”

Seigi looks helplessly from Jeffrey to his mother, his mouth open but no words coming out. Eventually he turns to Richard, pleading silently for help.

“Perhaps Seigi and I can take Nakata-san to the drawing room,” he says, to Seigi's evident relief. “Jeffrey, please have some drinks sent in.”

Before his cousin can say anything, Richard gestures for Seigi's mother to walk with him in the direction of the drawing room. Seigi hurries to catch up, walking by his mother's side in silence until they are inside the room and Richard has firmly closed the door behind them.

Nakata Hiromi seems in awe of everything in the room, staring around at the paintings and the furniture until Seigi gestures for her to sit beside him on the couch by the window. Even then, she sits upright, hands clasped in her lap as if she is cautious of touching anything.

Richard stands in front of her, and bows.

“Nakata-san, I am deeply sorry for the trouble my family and I have caused you.”

When he stands upright, she looks thoroughly bewildered.

“Could one of you please explain to me what on earth is going on?” she says, looking between the two of them. “You told me Seigi was helping you with a business deal, but then this man turns up at my home, shows me pictures of himself with Seigi in London, and asks if I've received my wedding invitation yet.” She turns to her son. “Seigi, is it true? You said it was a business partnership - why did this man say it was a wedding partnership?”

Seigi, still at a loss, looks to Richard.

“We weren't entirely honest with you, Nakata-san,” he says, “and for that, I am deeply sorry.”

“So what’s the truth? Are you getting married? Seigi, did you think I would be angry with you if you said you were involved with another man?”

It could be the easy way out, to tell her that they simply didn’t think she’d be comfortable with her son seeing another man. But Nakata Hiromi is entirely blameless in all of this, and Richard is tired of deception. Seigi does not deserve to have his family divided in the way that the Claremonts have been.

“I will tell you the truth,” he says to her. Then, looking at Seigi, he adds, “the whole truth. The family I said I was working with is my own. My uncle is the current Earl Claremont, a member of the British aristocracy, and the man you met is his youngest son, my cousin. The diamond they are trying to acquire is part of an inheritance, and for various reason, I am the only member of the family eligible to inherit it, otherwise it will be forfeited to a charity. The diamond is currently valued at around four billion yen.” She puts her hand to her mouth when she hears this. “The conditions of the will require that I must be married to a particular type of person, and until recently I had not been in a position to fulfil the conditions, which has caused some tension between my family and myself, to the extent that I had been estranged from them for some years. But then my cousin tracked me down to Tokyo, mistakenly assumed that Seigi and I were involved, and found a loophole in the will which would allow me to inherit the diamond if I entered into a civil partnership with Seigi.”

Hiromi nods as if she follows along, before looking to Seigi again.

“Is that why you came to England? To have this civil partnership, to help your employer inherit a diamond?”

Seigi looks sheepish, a hand rubbing at the back of his head. Under his mother’s stern gaze, he looks almost a child, and Richard finds himself remembering a rare scolding from Chieko that left him on the verge of tears.

“Ah, no, I barely knew about the diamond when I first came to England,” he tells her. “I really only came to find Richard. He left Japan so suddenly and without explanation. I was worried that he might be in trouble.”

“So you flew halfway around the world, even though you had no idea where Richard-san was?” Hiromi throws up her hands in despair. “Seigi, how many times have I warned you that this impulsive behaviour of yours was going to land you in real trouble one day?”

“Well, I sort of knew where he was,” Seigi explains, still looking embarrassed. “I met Richard’s mentor, and he told me about the Claremont estate. And then I met Jeffrey and he - he sort of helped me find Richard.”

“But somehow my cousin had got the wrong impression about Seigi and myself,” Richard says, feeling sympathy for Seigi under the weight of his mother’s frustrated worry. “He suggested that Seigi and I enter into a civil partnership - a same-sex marriage - in order to secure inheritance of the diamond. For...various reasons, it seemed like the least objectionable course of action.”

“What reasons?”

He had hoped that Hiromi wouldn’t press him on the matter - he really doesn’t want to have to tell her about Seigi’s plan to destroy the diamond.

“My estrangement from my family has been a cause of much distress - my eldest cousin, Henry, has suffered an illness as a result of the ensuing stress, and has been unable to fulfill his duties as

heir to the estate. And my family have promised significant financial compensation for Seigi in return for agreeing to the partnership.”

“And Seigi, you agreed to all of this? You weren’t pressured or blackmailed?”

“I agreed to it,” he tells her. “If it helps Richard and his family, then I’m okay with it. I mean, it doesn’t have to be forever. Once the inheritance is handled, Richard and I can arrange a separation.”

Hiromi looks at her son for a while, and Richard cannot read the look on her face.

“Seigi, I would like to talk to Richard-san alone for a moment.”

Surprised, Seigi gets to his feet, looking at Richard for help.

“Why don’t you find Jeffrey and see what has happened to our drinks?” he suggests. Seigi nods, and hurries out of the room.

“Nakata-san, if you object to this arrangement at all, it is not too late for us to call it off.”

She looks at him, and he can’t help thinking of Chieko and her fond exasperation whenever he was caught sneaking sweets from the kitchen.

“Richard-san, did Seigi ever tell you that I am divorced from his father?”

“He did mention it, yes.”

“I remarried some years ago. My husband is a good man. He works overseas, so there are times when I don’t see him much, but he takes good care of me. He has helped me give Seigi a much more stable home than his actual father could. Even though I didn’t marry for love the second time, it was a good thing for us. So it doesn’t surprise me that Seigi thinks that marriage is a practical thing, that one can do to help someone else.” She looks over towards the door where Seigi had been a few moments ago. “My son has always had a keen sense of right and wrong, and a tendency to rush in to help others without thinking first.”

“Something I know all too well. It was how I first met him, after all.”

She looks at him quizzically, so Richard recounts for her the story of how Seigi had saved him from drunks in Yoyogi Park, and then sat with him at the Police Box to make sure everything was recorded properly.

“And it seems that, once again, Seigi has rushed in to help me, even if it comes at some cost to himself.”

Hiromi considers his story for a moment, her hands once again clasped in her lap.

“I want my son to be safe and secure - what parent doesn’t?” she tells him. “But I also know that he is an adult now, and capable of making his own decisions. I can be there to support him if things don’t work out. But he made this decision on his own. After everything you’ve told me, I think that telling your family the truth, that you are only having this civil partnership to secure an inheritance, would only cause more trouble for Seigi. Perhaps it is better to see it through and then move on.”

Richard doesn’t hide his surprise at her response.

“We do not want to pressure you into playing along with our deception.”

“Do all of your family speak Japanese as well as you do, Richard-san?”

“Actually, only my cousin Jeffrey speaks any Japanese. We had a tutor from Tokyo when we were children.”

“Then I only have to pretend around one person.”

There’s a knock at the door, before either of them can speak again, and Richard answers it to find Seigi carrying a heavily laden tea tray.

“It’s not royal milk tea,” he tells Richard, “but there’s water and juice as well. And they said lunch would be served soon.”

For a while they busy themselves with drinks, Hiromi admiring the tea service as Seigi tells her about Richard’s tea habits.

“Seigi,” Hiromi says when they are all seated again, “while I’m still disappointed that you’re deferring your studies for a year, you are old enough to make your own decisions. If you believe that this is the best course of action for both of you, then I will accept your choice. But I expect you to be re-enrolled in college next year, and I expect you to make the most of the time you have between then and now.”

“I plan to return to Japan as soon as possible to re-open my shop,” Richard says, “and Seigi will be able to return to work with me if he wishes.”

“And I’ve been improving my English with Richard,” Seigi adds, “and studying online so I won’t fall behind.”

Hiromi turns the conversation to Seigi’s experiences in London after that, and the room feels a little more relaxed, until someone comes to tell them that lunch is about to be served. Seigi introduces his mother to Henry and then to Anna Marie; Hiromi seems a little flustered, bowing to his aunt, until Anna Marie tells her they’re practically family now and shakes her hand with a warm smile.

Over lunch, Seigi does an impressive job of translating Henry and Anna Marie’s questions to his mother, helped occasionally by Richard. Jeffrey and Godfrey don’t join them, and Richard is thankful as the meal passes quite pleasantly. Afterwards, Hiromi is shown to one of the guest rooms and allowed a little while to settle in properly before Seigi takes her on a tour of the grounds. This gives Richard a little time alone, and he makes himself comfortable on the chaise in his bedroom.

He knows that some distant relatives are due to arrive at any time, staying over the night before the ceremony. Dinner tonight is likely to be a lavish affair, with a full table of people no doubt all wanting to know where he has been for the past four years.

He doesn’t want to go. It’s childish, but he cannot bear the thought of sitting down to dinner with people he barely knows, answering their probing questions or facing the possibility of inappropriate comments about Seigi. Even if it’s fake, it is *his* wedding, and he should be able to have a little privacy with his husband-to-be the night before.

There is no one in the hallway when he looks out. It has been many years since he did anything that might resemble sneaking around the halls of his family home, but he remembers the illicit thrill of it as he slips out in the direction of his uncle’s study. After listening at the door for a moment, he concludes that there is no one inside, and lets himself in.

The old key safe is still there, as if Godfrey never knew of the times Jeffrey pilfered a set of car

keys to go on late night joyrides. The keys to the Triumph are gone, likely explaining why his uncle wasn't at lunch, but Richard finds a set with a Mercedes key fob and sneaks it into his pocket before slipping back into the hallway and back to his room.

By the time Seigi and Hiromi return, Richard is practically bouncing in place, eager to put his plan into action.

"Richard-san, the gardens here are beautiful," Hiromi says as soon as she sees him. "Really, I could spend all day there. It must be lovely in the summer."

He smiles, then looks to Seigi.

"Do you remember that pub we went to, the first week we were here?" Seigi nods. "Would you like to go back?"

"Aren't we supposed to have dinner with your family?"

"I will see them tomorrow. Tonight, I would like to spend some time with my prospective mother-in-law." He holds up the car keys, letting Seigi see the Mercedes logo.

He takes them down a back staircase, and the staff they pass along the way don't stop them as they slip outside to the garage, where his uncle's collection of cars sits alongside those of their guests. A few minutes later, they are headed down the driveway away from Claremont Hall and his family, Hiromi in the passenger seat beside him and Seigi laughing in the back seat, telling his mother about the time Richard drove him through the streets of Tokyo with Finnish metal music blasting from the stereo.

One way or another, he tells himself, he will make some happy memories during his time here.

It's after ten when they get back. Hiromi is almost asleep on her feet, jet-lagged and full of good food, and they see her back to her room to make sure she doesn't get lost.

They're almost home free, when Richard is startled by someone standing up suddenly from one of the chairs in the hall near his bedroom door.

"How was the Mercedes?" Godfrey asks, with a smile that's just a little too sharp.

"The rear suspension needs looking at." Richard hands over the car keys. "Seigi, why don't you go ahead and get ready for bed?"

Godfrey pockets the keys, keeping that smile up until Seigi has closed the door behind himself.

"You know, it was damned embarrassing having to tell our guests that you'd done a runner the night before your own wedding. Some of those people have travelled a long way to see you."

"I will apologise to them when I see them tomorrow. And don't worry - I will inform you before we return to Japan for good."

His uncle lets out a long sigh, and shakes his head.

"And I suppose you're planning on leaving as soon as the inheritance is dealt with?"

"I do have a business to run."

"You're not going to spend time with your family? Look, I know you and Jeff have had your differences, but everyone's trying their damndest to make you feel welcomed and you're making

it obvious you'd rather be anywhere else but here."

There is a brief sting of guilt that Richard cannot deny, a pang of shame for Henry and for his aunt. But all Richard has to do to get past it is remember Deborah telling him she wanted to end things, and that old simmering anger begins to boil again.

"Trust needs to be earned," he says, doing his best to meet Godfrey's eye. "You can't just throw a party and assume everything is forgiven. Jeffrey may have been the one responsible for destroying my relationship, but the rest of you all stood by and let him, without any recrimination. You all valued that damn diamond above my happiness."

It's an effort to keep his voice down; as angry as he is, the last thing he wants is for one of his relations to come out into the hall to see what the noise is all about.

"Of course we want you to be happy, Richard. But we've talked before about family responsibilities."

"So if Seigi wasn't eligible to inherit the diamond, would you still want me to be happy?" Or would my responsibility as an heir once again take precedence?"

"That's a moot point. The two of you are happy together, and the relationship doesn't violate the terms of the inheritance, so there's no problems for anyone."

Richard bites off the retort that's about to slip out. Instead, he shakes his head.

"It is late. Tomorrow is a big day, and I would like some rest. I will see our guests tomorrow. Good night."

Godfrey doesn't say anything else as he turns towards his room. The sound of the door as he closes it behind himself is wonderfully satisfying, and he leans against the door for a moment to try and let his anger fade.

"I hope we didn't cause too much trouble," Seigi says. He is already in his pyjamas, sitting up in bed. All Richard wants to do is to lay next to him, lay his head in Seigi's lap, have Seigi run gentle fingers through his hair until he falls asleep.

"Nothing to worry about. Some of those visitors haven't seen me for ten years. They can wait another day."

When he has changed and they are both settled into bed, he turns off the lamp and waits for Seigi to fall asleep. But tonight, he seems unusually restless.

"Are you nervous?" Richard asks after a while. "About tomorrow?"

"Yeah, a little. Or maybe more than a little."

"Do you know what it is exactly that you're nervous about?"

Seigi is quiet for a moment, as he thinks about it.

"Getting the words right in the ceremony, for one. I worry that I'll say the wrong thing, and people will think I'm stupid."

"Anyone who thinks that is not worth worrying about. But we can go over it again, if you'd like."

"That might help."



“Okay.” He brings the script to mind: they’ve gone over the formalities of the ceremony as part of Seigi’s English lessons, and the much-rehearsed words come back easily. In English, he begins, “Repeat after me. I, Seigi.”

“I, Seigi.”

“Take you, Richard.”

“Take you, Richard.”

“To be my lawful partner.”

“To be my lawful partner. Wait, not ‘husband’?”

“Not for a civil partnership.”

“Oh.”

“To have and to hold.”

“To have and - wait, why ‘to have’? I don’t really understand that verb in that context. In what way would I ‘have’ you?”

“Do you want to practise, or do you want an English lesson at this late hour?”

“Sorry. I want to practise.”

They continue, then try a second time without interruption, until Seigi can say the words easily. Then they talk through the ring exchange, and how the registrar will pronounce them partners.

“I heard, in western weddings,” Seigi begins, and Richard knows where he is headed, feeling the end of Seigi’s train of thought looming up like the tip of an iceberg, “that they say, ‘you may kiss the bride’. But neither of us is a bride. Will the registrar just miss that part out?”

“I suppose they may say, ‘kiss each other’. It is traditional.” Even though the room is dark, Richard keeps his face turned up to the ceiling. “Are you anxious about that moment as well?”

“Huh. I don’t think I’d really thought about the reality of it much before now. But perhaps I am a little. I’ve never kissed anyone before.”

Richard feels his entire being suspended as if in mid-air, as though he’s on a swing that has just reached the top of its curve and is about to drop back down again.

He cannot. He *will not* suggest kissing practice like a fumbling, randy teenager.

“Have you?” Seigi asks, his voice quiet. “Ah, I suppose you must have. You were engaged before.”

“I have.”

“What’s it like? It looks like such a weird thing to do, to touch someone else with your mouth. But sometimes I just... I feel like it’s something I need to do with someone. If I think about that person. Ah, is that a strange thing to say?”

“Not at all.” He tries not to think about Seigi kissing Tanimoto-san. Tries to remember the first time he kissed Deborah. For all that he was a nervous mess throughout, it had been sweet, once she

had soothed him into relaxing with a gentle hand on his cheek. “It’s a way of being close, being intimate, with someone you care for deeply. If it’s something you both want, then when it happens, it will feel right.”

“With someone I care for?”

“Yes. Platonic kisses are quite common in some cultures.”

Perhaps he should think about Seigi kissing Tanimoto-san. Perhaps that might serve to remind him that, even though they are going to play at romance tomorrow in plain sight of everyone, it is only pretend; that even when Seigi puts a ring on his finger and promises to love him, even when they kiss, it is not real.

“Richard? Are you anxious about it too?”

“Hmm. Perhaps, a little.”

“You’re a good actor though. I’m sure, if I follow your lead, we can fool everyone tomorrow.”

“You’re quite the actor yourself,” he says. “Certainly capable of convincing everyone.”

“Ah, really? I think I feel a little better now. Thanks, Richard.”

“Good night, Seigi.”

“Good night.”

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Notes

As you can see, I've increased the chapter count - I'm not sure how I ever thought I could fit the wedding and the day before the wedding into one chapter (this chapter alone is over 10k words!). But I hope this is worth the wait.

For once, he wakes up to find Seigi still laying in bed beside him. Perhaps he is awake earlier than usual due to nerves, or perhaps Seigi has lingered in bed longer than usual.

“Good morning.” Seigi smiles at him. God, he wants to wake up to that smile every day.

“Good morning.” Is what he *tries* to say. But he has only just woken up, and Richard knows he cannot function for at least an hour after waking up. What actually comes out of his mouth is a muffled nonsense that has Seigi chuckling. Richard pulls the blankets up over his head to hide his face, and Seigi laughs even more, reaching out to pull them back down and mussing Richard's hair in the process as they fight over whether Richard gets to be seen for the monster he always is when he wakes up.

Seigi wins, eventually, pulling the blankets all the way over to his side of the bed and leaving Richard cold and pouting. He pushes himself up to sit against the headboard, and Seigi finally relinquishes enough blanket for him to cover his lap, sitting up next to him and reaching out for his phone to check the time.

It's a little after eight - early for Richard, but not unbearably so.

“We're really going to have the ceremony today,” Seigi says, looking over towards the window. Even with the curtains closed, there's enough grey autumn morning light creeping in that he can see the room well enough. “I kept thinking about it as something in the future. Like when you're looking forward to the end of term, and then suddenly it arrives and you feel unprepared for it?”

“Just a couple more days, and then we can return to Tokyo. We still have that to look forward to.”

“I wonder what it'll be like, when we're back? When all this is in the past.”

Richard picks at the blanket puddled in his lap.

“Will you have any happy memories of it, at least?”

Seigi looks at him in surprise.

“Of course! I've seen places I never would have seen if I'd stayed in Tokyo. Eaten new foods, and improved my English. And I've seen sides of you I never would have seen otherwise.”

Richard reaches up and tries to smooth down his hair where it has become tousled against the pillow.

“Perhaps some things are better as memories.”

“Don’t worry.” Seigi looks at him, his smile so soft Richard wants to remember it always. “You’re still beautiful, even when you’ve only just woken up.”

Before Richard can scold him, there is a knock at the door. Seigi climbs out of bed and crosses the room to answer it.

“Good morning, sir.” It’s one of the staff, although Richard can’t put a face to the voice. “Her ladyship said to bring breakfast to your room this morning. She’ll be along to see you later.”

Seigi thanks her, and opens the door for her to wheel in a trolley so full of plates and cups and pots that rattle as it moves. Although the staff member doesn’t look at him, Richard still tries to fix his hair and straighten up the sheets over his lap.

When she has gone, Seigi brings the trolley over to the bed and hands Richard a bottle of water and a croissant on a plate. There’s a teapot and a coffee pot, a pitcher of orange juice, a full toast rack with butter and three types of jam, more croissants, pain au chocolat and bread rolls, and Seigi lifts up a silver cover to reveal a plate of sausages, bacon and scrambled eggs. Richard rolls his eyes at the extravagance, but then he remembers attending family weddings when he was younger.

“Feel free to fill up as much as you want,” he tells Seigi, “as we are unlikely to have anything else to eat until well into the afternoon.”

They make a picnic of bacon and sausage sandwiches, eating in bed with plates on their knees as Seigi asks him questions about wedding traditions. They have already gone over what will happen during the ceremony, so that Seigi knows what he is supposed to say and when even if he can’t keep up with what the officiant is saying, but Richard keeps remembering little peculiarities from other weddings he’s attended, like confetti outdoors, and bridesmaids and pageboys, and readings and hymns - all things that won’t be included in their partnership, he realises.

If they did this for real, would they want any of that, he wonders. Would Seigi want to invite a friend to be his best man? Does he have young relatives who would be pageboys? Perhaps they could have a Japanese wedding - there is the Shibuya ordinance, after all.

When they’ve brushed the crumbs from the bedspread, Richard takes his toiletry bag to the bathroom to shower and shave and fix his hair, and then switches with Seigi whose hair is somehow annoyingly acceptable when he wakes up, as if he doesn’t move at all once he’s asleep. He puts on his trousers and shirt, and adds a pair of cufflinks, then stops when he catches his reflection in the mirror.

Is he actually going to go through with this? Stand up in front of his family and say wedding vows, so they can have that damned diamond?

His thoughts turn, unbidden, to Deborah. If they’d gone ahead and eloped, where would they be now? He knows that she is doing well, perhaps even better off for their separation. But those ‘what if’s will never truly leave him.

He finds his phone, and opens up his e-mail, pulling up the last message from her, a couple of months ago now. He really shouldn’t have left it so long to reply; there is no possible way he can fit everything that’s happened since that last message into one e-mail. But he tells her, succinctly, *I’d like to call you sometime next week, if you have time. There is much to catch up on.*

The message sends, just as the door opens and Seigi comes back in, wearing that old dressing gown of Richard’s he was given when he first arrived at Claremont Hall. Richard politely turns his back as Seigi begins to get dressed, busying himself with his own tie and waistcoat, until he hears Seigi

make a noise of dismay.

“Ah, Richard, my shirt!” He turns to see Seigi, thankfully with trousers on, holding out his arm to show the double-cuff of his shirt sleeve flapping loose. “I didn’t realise it needed cufflinks!”

Richard smiles, and crosses the room to find his luggage, from which he pulls a small box, which he opens to show Seigi.

“All taken care of,” he says, as he hands the box to Seigi. “They’re yours. To keep.” Seigi takes one out of the box and holds it up, his face slack with disbelief.

“Are these - Richard, really? Diamonds?”

They’re only small; each gold oval has a diamond set into a star-shaped engraving off-set from the centre. Subtle, but classy. But Seigi looks at him like he’s just been given the moon.

“We will be exchanging rings today, and I know that the promise those rings are meant to represent is not one we are making genuinely. But I would like you to have something from me, as a promise that your sacrifices on my behalf will be compensated.”

He takes the box from Seigi’s unresisting hand, and motions for Seigi to hold out his arm. Somehow, he manages to keep his fingers steady as he slips the first cufflink into the cuff of Seigi’s shirt, and then the other. Seigi tilts his wrists, watching the way the stones catch the light.

“I don’t have anything to give you in return,” Seigi says, sounding mournful.

“I did not give them with the expectation of getting something back. I simply wanted you to have a gem of your own. There aren’t many styles of jewellery for men that incorporate precious stones, but these seemed appropriate for today.”

Seigi looks as though he’s about to speak, when a knock at the door interrupts. Richard turns away as Seigi goes to answer it, and he hopes that his face isn’t giving away too much emotion. He sets the empty jewellery box down on the desk and picks up his phone from where he’d left it. There’s an e-mail notification, but it can wait until later; he sets the phone to silent and puts it into his pocket.

It’s Hiromi at the door, and Seigi lets her in, offering her coffee. She talks for a while about the breakfast that was sent up to her room, and asks Seigi if every day is like that at Claremont Hall, or if it’s just because today is a special occasion.

“I don’t know much about English wedding traditions,” she tells them both. “I heard there are hymns?”

“At a traditional Christian wedding, yes,” Richard says, “but since this is a civil service, we are going to keep things simple. The officiant will talk a little about what a civil partnership means, Seigi and I will say our vows, we will exchange rings, and that is it. Most of the day is actually spent on photographs and the reception.”

“Richard is looking forward to the cake,” Seigi interjects, and he and his mother share a quiet laugh. He doesn’t mind terribly as Seigi tells her about his fondness for sweets, and she seems impressed when Seigi says that he makes pudding for Richard sometimes.

“Seigi is an excellent cook,” Richard tells her. “You should be proud that he is so capable. Certainly more than I was when I finished university.”

“Perhaps, when you are back in Japan, the two of you should come to my house for dinner.”

“I would be honoured.”

She fusses for a while over Seigi’s appearance, straightening his collar and ruffling his hair, before standing back to look at the two of them. For a moment, it looks as though she is about to say something, but then she shakes her head.

“I hope today is a good day for you both,” she tells them instead of whatever she had been about to say. “I hope that you can see your intentions through, and that you and your family can make amends, Richard-san.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that, other than, “Thank you.”

She leaves them to finish getting ready, and Richard finds himself longing for those mornings in the flat, with the radio playing while Seigi made breakfast. His bedroom is starkly quiet as he pulls on his jacket and arranges his pocket square. His hair has dried a little too fluffy, and he takes some pomade from his bag to tame it a little.

“Would you like some?” He offers the tin to Seigi, when he realises Seigi is watching him intently.

“Oh, I’ve never used it before. Except when the barber used some on me that one time. I wouldn’t know what to do.”

He motions for Seigi to sit on the chair by the desk, and stands behind him, working the pomade between his hands. Seigi’s hair is beautifully thick when he runs his fingers through it, and the barber thankfully left enough length on top to let him work it into something with more style than Seigi usually has. He takes his time, trying not to pull too much, and focusing on the feel of Seigi’s hair and scalp against his skin.

When was the last time anyone let him touch them like this? It’s dangerous, he knows, to get carried away. But when will he get another opportunity like today?

He moves around the chair to inspect his handiwork, teasing at the hairs around Seigi’s temples to neaten everything up. Seigi’s eyes are closed, and Richard takes advantage, committing everything to memory: the length of his eyelashes, the curve of his lips, the dip of an old scar near his nose.

Eventually he has to let go and step back. Seigi must sense his movement, opening one eye and asking if he’s done. He turns and checks his reflection, smiling softly as he runs a hand over the front of his own hair where Richard has swept it up and over. Next, Seigi buttons up his waistcoat and fixes his tie, frowning as he fumbles with the knot.

“Richard, would you?” His voice is low, something uncertain in his tone that Richard is unaccustomed to.

He obliges without hesitation, and again he marvels at the details, the soft hum of the fabric between his fingers, the rise and fall of Seigi’s chest. These quiet moments of closeness are scarce. He needs to savour them.

“There.” He checks the knot one last time, making sure it is nestled snug against Seigi’s collar. The waistcoat looks stunning on him, cut to fit neatly at his waist and show off the curve at the small of his back in a way that his T-shirts and hoodies never do. If Seigi begins dressing like this regularly, there is no doubt that he will start turning heads. Given a couple of years, a decent salary and the know-how to develop his own sense of style, Seigi is going to be a knock-out, Richard is certain.

A tap at the door jolts him back to reality, and he turns to answer it, ready to snap at whoever has interrupted his private moment.

When he opens the door, he has to take a full step back out of surprise.

“Catherine?”

For some reason, it had not occurred to him that his mother might be attending. His aunt and uncle haven’t mentioned inviting her at all.

“Richard. Would you like to tell me why I had to hear about your wedding from my sister-in-law?”

His mouth opens and closes a couple of times, as he fights that horrible feeling of childish helplessness that Claremont Hall keeps bringing out in him. Finally, instead of answering her, he turns to Seigi, the one person he knows he can speak to like a reasonable adult.

“Seigi, this is my mother, Catherine deVulpian.”

Not surprisingly, Seigi’s face is agog, staring openly at her as she looks him over.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he manages eventually, his English more hesitant than Richard has heard it for a while.

“I wish I had been able to meet you sooner,” she tells him. “Apparently this was some sort of whirlwind romance?” She looks back at Richard, an eyebrow arched.

“Not exactly,” Richard begins. He feels like such a child, like they’ve been caught necking in his bedroom.

“Well, how should I know? My invitation to my own son’s wedding has my in-laws’ names on it instead of my own, inviting me to celebrate a marriage to someone whose name I’ve never heard before. Really, Richard, you couldn’t have sent me a letter yourself? Picked up the telephone?”

“I’m sorry. When did you arrive?” Oh god, was she at dinner last night?

“Just now. I came up on the train yesterday, and stayed at a hotel in Cambridge. Thankfully it’s past the start of the university term, so I wasn’t having to fight past all the parents dropping off their little darlings - university towns are beastly if you’re not a student. Well, are you going to let me in, or do I keep standing out here in the hallway?”

He stumbles back another step, giving her enough space to come into the room properly and close the door behind her.

“This is Seigi. The man I’m marrying.”

“Seigi.” She says his name as though she is testing the shape of the word in her mouth. “I wish I could have met you sooner.”

Seigi takes a couple of steps towards her, then hesitates. It’s clear from the look on his face that he is in awe of her, the way all men are inevitably in awe of her.

Eventually he pulls himself together enough to stammer out, “Nice to meet you,” once again, bobbing his head in an awkward bow. She gives him a surprised look, before walking past both of them to seat herself on the chaise, holding her clutch bag in her lap. When neither of them can find anything to say, she pats the seat beside her and beckons for Seigi to join her. Seigi is hesitant, but

sits by her, keeping as much distance as politely possible while Richard takes the chair by the desk.

“This all seems very sudden,” she says, looking at Richard. “And the Claremonts are supportive enough that they’re actually hosting your wedding. Richard, are you doing this for the diamond?”

It would be easy to tell her everything, just as they have done with Hiromi. His mother certainly doesn’t deserve to be deceived. But unlike Hiromi, Catherine is much more likely to make conversation with his extended family, and has far more reason to want to spite the Claremonts by letting slip some hint that their marriage isn’t genuine.

“I don’t care about the diamond,” he tells her. That, at least, is not a lie.

“So this is a love match?” She turns to Seigi, and Richard feels his chest tighten with a sudden panic. “Seigi, you love my son?”

He wonders if he might need to translate, but Seigi, far braver than he has ever been, looks Catherine in the eye.

“Richard is very precious to me,” he says, sounding out the words with determination. “Two months ago, when he came to England without me, it felt like there was a hole in my heart.”

When Richard looks at his mother, she seems just as stunned as he feels.

“Well,” she says, adjusting her hold on her clutch, “now I want to know what happened to make you leave this young man alone and bereft, Richard.” She fixes him with a piercing look that brings back that familiar childish helplessness.

“Catherine,” he starts, unsure what he can say that will get her to end this conversation and leave them alone without letting Seigi know just how lost he feels.

“Don’t worry, we can talk later,” she tells him, thankfully. “But I’m sure I don’t need to remind you to be careful. If the Claremonts are willing to embrace this match, you can be sure they see something in it for themselves.”

When she leaves the room, Richard briefly presses his forehead to the closed door, trying to will away the annoyance and frustration. The urge to leave is there yet again, to take Seigi and slip down to the garage and take one of the cars and just drive and never come back.

A knock at the door makes him jump, and he yanks it open, ready to snap at whoever is responsible for this latest interruption. His anger is deflated by the smiling faces of his aunt and Jeffrey, each holding a bottle and a couple of champagne glasses.

“Bucks Fizz, darling,” his aunt announces, waving the bottle of champagne at him. “I forgot to have some sent up with your breakfast, so I thought I’d deliver it myself.”

He has no choice but to let them into the room. Jeffrey appoints himself bartender, popping the champagne bottle with practised ease and pouring out drinks that are definitely more alcohol than orange juice. Seigi naturally looks concerned when Anna Marie hands him a glass.

“It’s called a Bucks Fizz, darling,” she tells him. “It’s an English wedding tradition to have one on the morning of your wedding. Well, it’s definitely a tradition for the bride and her bridesmaids, anyway. Jeffrey, do Englishmen drink Bucks Fizz on the morning of their wedding?”

“I think they’re usually too hungover from their stag party the night before.” He sits himself on the corner of Richard’s bed, the way he used to when they were teenagers.



Seigi takes a tentative sip of his drink, eyes lighting up at the taste.

“Isn’t it a fun drink?” Anna Marie says to him, before drinking her own. “Oh, you two boys look so handsome, I’m willing to forgive you for playing truant from dinner last night. Well, actually, I don’t blame you entirely for that. Godfrey’s relatives aren’t always the most scintillating conversationalists. And Seigi, I’m sure you enjoyed catching up with your mother.”

She takes a seat on the chair, leaving Richard and Seigi no choice but to sit next to each other on the chaise longue.

“Wait!” Anna Marie claps a hand to her mouth. “Isn’t it bad luck for you two to see each other before the ceremony?”

“Neither of them is a bride, mother,” Jeffrey reminds her. “And besides, that’s just a superstition.”

“Well, I suppose since this isn’t exactly a traditional wedding, the two of you can do as you please. You could even start a new tradition of your own.” She drains the last of her glass. “You know, Jeffrey, I’m looking forward more than ever to doing this all again for you and your brother. You’d better not keep me waiting too long.”

Jeffrey buries his nose in his glass, but Richard is certain that his usual coolness slips from his face for just a moment.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, mother. This is Ricky’s special day, after all.”

“Oh, I guess I’m just a little emotional.” She wipes at the corner of her eye, careful not to smudge her make-up. “Richard, you know I’m genuinely happy for you, don’t you? You’ve found someone special, who wants to take care of you, and who you clearly care for in return. Make the most of today, won’t you? You’ll be remembering today for the rest of your lives, after all.”

At a loss for words, Richard reaches out and takes Seigi’s hand, reassured when Seigi squeezes his fingers just a little.

“Thank you,” Seigi says for the both of them. “I hope today will be a happy memory for everyone.”

Anna Marie looks on the verge of crying, so Jeffrey bustles her out of the room. Before he leaves, he turns back to Richard, and Richard braces himself for whatever his cousin has to say.

“I’ll forgive you for not asking me to be your best man,” he says with his usual glibness, before his face becomes serious. “But I truly do wish good things for both of you. I want to see the two of you happy together. You deserve it.”

He has no idea what to say to that. Fortunately Jeffrey doesn’t hang around for an answer, slipping out into the hallway and closing the door after himself.

Richard realises he is still holding Seigi’s hand. He doesn’t let go just yet.

“We have a little time before we need to go down to the ballroom,” he says after a quick glance at his watch. “Hopefully that will be our last interruption.”

There is a little champagne left, so he pours them both a second drink, this time more juice than alcohol.

“My family can be...overbearing. I hope they haven’t made you too nervous.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” Seigi says. “If I get anxious, I’ll just look at you. Your face will calm me down.”

They’re close enough on the chaise that their knees are touching. Richard could so easily lean in and kiss him now. Blame it on the alcohol, call it a practise for later.

He stands up, puts his glass on the breakfast trolley. Checks his tie in the mirror and adjusts his pocket square.

“Do you want to go over the words one last time?”

“No, thank you. I think I have it now. It’s just repeating what the officiant says, right?” Seigi finishes his drink, and sets to cleaning up after their breakfast, putting things back on the trolley. After a while, he brings a plate with one pain-au-chocolat, and sets it down on the desk. “These are still good cold, right? I thought you might want to have something sweet, since you said lunch will be late in the afternoon.”

Richard reaches out for Seigi’s tie. Seigi looks confused for a moment, until Richard adjusts the knot, fitting it against his collar so that it sits better. He smooths out invisible wrinkles in the shoulders of Seigi’s jacket, and twitches his pocket square into a more appealing shape.

“So that was your mother,” Seigi says. Richard keeps his eyes fixed on Seigi’s jacket. “I can’t get over how much she looks like you.”

“Seigi?”

“Yes?”

“Today we are supposed to show my family that we are in love and committing our lives to one another. If you stare at my mother all day, they may not be convinced.” He slips his hands up to Seigi’s lapels, and finally looks at Seigi. “Keep your eyes on me today. Only me.” He moves a hand up to Seigi’s cheek. Seigi’s eyes are warm, vibrant above the richness of his suit and under the dark sweep of his hair. He waits, heart fluttering against his ribs, for some interruption. There is none; his family are waiting downstairs, waiting for both of them. “Let’s go.”

They walk to the ballroom in silence, and find Anna Marie with the officiant outside the door to the ballroom.

“Right on time,” she says to them with a smile, before introducing them both to the officiant. It’s not one of the staff they met at the registry office, and for that Richard is oddly thankful.

“Pleasure to meet you gents,” he says to them with a smile. “Shame I couldn’t meet you both properly to go over everything, but your aunt explained to me how busy you’ve been, and she’s been a gem, planning all of this.” Richard and Seigi can only nod. “So, since neither of you is being walked down the aisle and ‘given away’, so to speak, you’ll both enter the room together - the music will start up and you’ll open the door and walk in together. Just make your way down the aisle between the seats, and stop when you get to me. Got it?” They nod again.

Anna Marie and the officiant both smile at each other, and turn to slip through the door, leaving the two of them alone. The muffled sound of a string quartet is just audible from inside the room, above the chatter of the assembled guests.

“We’re really going to do this.” Seigi stares straight ahead at the closed doors, and even though Richard can only see a little of his face, it’s evident that Seigi is anxious. He takes hold of Seigi’s hand, and this time laces their fingers together. Seigi’s palm is warm, but not unpleasantly so, and

Richard squeezes their hands together, feeling Seigi squeeze back.

“It won’t take long. Just listen to the officiant, and keep your eyes on me.”

“I can do that.”

He hears the music end, and then the familiar notes of the cello concerto begin. They both reach out with their free hands and pull open the doors to the ballroom just in time to see the guests rise to their feet and turn as one to look at them.

Richard avoids their faces, not bothering to see who he recognises. He keeps his eyes on the officiant, at the far end of the aisle that’s been made between two sets of seats. The walk feels unnaturally slow; do brides feel like this, when they are walked down the aisle by their fathers? On show, deliberately awkward so that everyone can look at them? His hand feels too tight around Seigi’s, their fingers locked together, but he can’t let go.

The music ends as they reach their place in front of the registrar, nowhere near the end of the movement, but the cellist somehow makes the stop sound natural.

“Good morning, everyone,” the officiant says, as the guests sit back down behind them. Richard has no idea who is sitting where; both sides of the room are filled, even though only Hiromi is there to represent Seigi’s family. “On behalf of his grace, the Earl of Claremont and her ladyship, and on behalf of Richard and Seigi, I would like to welcome you all to witness the joining of these two men in their civil partnership.”

He continues, saying something about love knowing no laws, but Richard cannot keep up. Instead, his mind offers images of standing beside Deborah in some chapel at Gretna Green. Maybe there is some parallel world where the two of them really did elope. If there is, he hopes that version of himself is happy.

Seigi’s hand shifts a little in his, but he doesn’t let go. Almost as though Seigi is reminding him of his own words earlier: *keep your eyes on me*. For better or worse - hah! - he is here with Seigi, and even though every instinct in him is telling him to turn and run, to stop this madness, he fights through it, keeping his feet planted and trying his best to focus on what the officiant is saying.

“...must ask, if anyone here knows of any reason...”

Ah, it’s that part. Richard holds his breath.

“...may not be joined in a civil partnership, please speak now.”

His eyes flick to his left, to Seigi, who seems to have the same urge, meeting his look. Behind them, the assembled guests stay silent.

“Very well.” Richard feels the air rush from him. “Richard and Seigi, I must now ask each of you in turn: are you, Richard Claremont, lawfully free to take this man as your partner?”

He hates that name, he hates that name.

“I am.”

“And are you, Seigi Nakata, lawfully free to take this man as your partner?”

“I am.”

He nods, and smiles at both of them.

“Very good. Now, you may turn to each other, and Richard, please repeat after me: I call upon these persons here present...”

Richard repeats his lines dutifully, facing Seigi, taking hold of both his hands. He still has no idea who is watching them; the faces are no more than a blur out of the corner of his eye. He stands perfectly still, as Seigi takes his turn, repeating the words, asking people he’s never met to witness his partnership. Seigi’s eyes are warm, the rich brown of his suit is perfect against his skin, and his hands feel strong as he holds Richard steady.

“Now, I believe you will be exchanging rings today,” the registrar says. Panic once again floods Richard’s whole body, until Seigi dips a hand into the jacket pocket and produces two boxes. Richard feels the corner of his mouth flicker upwards just a little as Seigi hands him the blue box containing his own ring. “Although this is not a traditional wedding ceremony, the traditional vows of love and commitment still apply,” the officiant tells the guests. “And so, as you exchange your rings, please repeat after me.”

Richard opens up the box in his hand, taking out the gold band and pocketing the box before reaching out to take Seigi’s left hand, repeating the words after the registrar.

“I, Richard, take you, Seigi, to be my partner. To have and to hold, to love and to cherish, from this day forward, until death parts us.” It’s like a play, he realises; in spite of his backstage panic about lines and props, everything is unfolding so precisely. The words are simply a script, the exchange of rings just a choreographed movement of props. The only truth in the whole thing depends on his intent as an actor.

What even is his intent in all of this? To acquire a diamond? To end the rift with his family? To help Seigi earn some money?

The words taste like chalk in his mouth. He wants to mean them. To tell Seigi, *I do love you, cherish you, want you.*

As he slips the ring on to Seigi’s finger, something mischievous takes over his mouth. It’s just a play, after all. A little ad lib won’t hurt.

In Japanese, he says to Seigi, “From now on, whatever happens, I promise that I will take care of you and protect you, if you will let me.”

There are only two other people in the room who will understand it besides Seigi, and only one of those two actually matters to him. With any luck, she will see his promise for what it really is.

Seigi looks up at him once the ring is secure on his finger. His eyes are bright, his mouth open just a fraction.

Richard offers his left hand. Seigi falters for a moment, before taking the other ring out and holding it ready to put on Richard’s hand.

“I, Seigi,” he begins, repeating after the officiant, “take you, Richard, to be my partner. To have and to hold, to love and to cherish, from this day forward, until death parts us.” And then, because Seigi knows how to follow where Richard leads, he says in Japanese, “And I promise to support you, in any way that I can. And - and to make you pudding, for as long as you will let me.”

There’s a soft surprised laugh from somewhere in the crowd that can only be Hiromi. Richard smiles, for her, and for Seigi, taking both his hands once again.

“And so,” the registrar continues, as if the world has not come to a complete stop, “it brings me great pleasure to pronounce you, Richard and Seigi, partners. You may kiss each other.”

Richard’s left hand, the one with the ring, reaches up to Seigi’s cheek, partly to hide his anxious face from their guests, and partly out of some long-buried muscle-memory. It’s been years, but his body remembers what to do, even remembers the way Deborah had held his cheek in just the same way to soothe him through their first kiss. He leans in, feeling Seigi mirror his movements, as they bring their lips together. It’s sweet, far too sweet a thing to be seen by so many strangers, and Richard feels his eyes close as he tries to memorise the feeling of Seigi’s mouth against his. He wants to stay here, in this single moment, for as long as the world will let him.

There’s a patter of polite applause, which spreads across the gathered crowd slower than it ought to. Richard pulls away, but not too much, resting his forehead against Seigi’s just to stay a moment longer. Seigi’s left hand is on his waist - when did that happen? - and when he leans back just enough to see Seigi’s face, those warm eyes are bright and wet, and Richard manages to catch a tear with his thumb just as it spills on to Seigi’s cheek.

“Dear friends,” the officiant says over their heads, “while the grooms and their witnesses sign the marriage licence, the bar will be open for drinks.”

The crowd rise to their feet almost as one, and Richard feels the space open up beside them as the guests shuffle along the rows of seats. The other side of the ballroom is open, he realises, with a bar set up at the far end. He watches as the crowd thins out around the room, until his aunt and uncle come up to thank the registrar.

Henry is the first one to speak to them, clapping Richard on his shoulder. In his suit, he looks much more like the Henry he remembers from their youth, smart and smiling and looking genuinely proud of his cousin.

“Congratulations,” he tells them both. “I don’t know how to say it in Japanese, I’m sorry. I should learn that.”

Seigi thanks him, and tells him it’s fine, before turning to look for his mother. Hiromi is hovering by the seats, and Richard hopes she was allowed to sit at the front, at least, although he wouldn’t put it past some of his family to leave her at the back.

“That was much shorter than I expected,” she tells them when she comes over, reaching out and brushing some invisible speck of lint from her son’s lapel. Then, she reaches out and takes Seigi’s hand to look at his ring. “Pudding? That’s what you promise your husband?”

Before either of them can explain, the officiant calls them over. Along with Hiromi and Catherine, they are taken to a corner of the room where a table is set up with flowers, where they will sign the marriage licence. As they move around the back to take their seats, Anna Marie comes up to the table.

“Photographs!” she calls, and Richard’s heart sinks. Although he hasn’t attended many weddings, he knows that this is the most arduous part of the day. Anna Marie has employed a team of two for the wedding photography, and with their set up, it takes close to twenty minutes for the licence to be properly signed and witnessed. Pictures are taken of the two of them smiling and holding pens, then the two of them with Hiromi and Catherine, then of their joined hands displaying their rings over the licence itself. Then, they are led out to the terrace and put through a seemingly never-ending procession of photographs with the Claremonts, with Hiromi, with Catherine, with Hiromi and Catherine, with Jeffrey and Henry, then all the guests together, that single photograph alone taking close to half an hour to set up. Richard desperately wants a glass of water, but Anna Marie

leads them and the photographers out to the winter garden for more pictures.

“Something romantic,” she instructs, “not so posed.”

For another hour, the photographers follow them around the garden, instructing them to walk, hold hands, pause next to especially interesting plants or trees, and talk to each other, while they shoot bursts of supposedly ‘candid’ intimate pictures. For Richard, who has actively avoided cameras for many years, the whole thing feels painfully invasive, as each time he tries to give Seigi the sort of soft, romantic look the photographers ask for, the snap of the shutter sounds rings in his ears like a mosquito buzz and he has to fight the instinct to turn away or block the lens with his hand.

When they pause by a vibrant display of bromeliads, Seigi tilts his head toward Richard and whispers, “Will these photos be put on the Internet?”

Richard glances over at the photographer, who gestures for them to keep moving.

“These will be printed for an album. I will ask my aunt to instruct the photographers not to use our photos for their own promotion, and the guests are familiar enough with the gossip columns that they know better than to post family photographs online. I think we will be safe from seeing pictures of today anywhere else.”

Seigi seems relieved by that, and as he leans in towards Richard just a little, the cameras fire off another burst of shots. Richard takes advantage of their audience, and puts a hand on Seigi’s waist, the other on his shoulder.

“Just think about this time next week,” he says, his mouth close to Seigi’s ear as the cameras continue to snap. “We will be back in Tokyo, and you can see your friends again.”

“Can we go to Shiseido Parlour again?”

Richard affects a pout.

“What happened to making pudding for me? Are you breaking your promise already?”

Seigi’s smile is soft and sweet, and Richard wants to kiss it. He puts his hand to Seigi’s cheek - his left hand, so that his ring is visible for the cameras.

“I’ll make you pudding, and tea,” Seigi says, “as soon as we’re back in the shop.”

“I can’t wait.”

Finally, the photographers announce that they have enough shots, and they head back inside. Richard’s stomach is grumbling, and he is relieved to see that, while they have been outside, the rows of seats have been rearranged to accommodate half a dozen tables, with their guests seated and ready to eat. There’s another patter of applause when they appear in the doorway to the ballroom, louder this time now that their guests have had time to drink, and they smile and wave politely to their guests as Godfrey steers them both to their seats at the top table.

“Family, friends, thank you all for joining us today,” Godfrey announces, as they sit down. Hiromi is seated next to Seigi, looking happy to see them if a little overwhelmed by it all. Godfrey and Anna Marie are on Richard’s side of the table; a quick scan of the room shows that his own mother has been seated with Jeffrey and Henry at one of the guest tables. No doubt he will be hearing about that particular slight for some time. “It brings me great pleasure to welcome my nephew back into his family home, along with his new partner. His business has kept him travelling the globe for the past few years now, but I am glad he has chosen to come home, to allow us to join

him in celebrating this union.”

Richard reaches for the glass of water by his place setting, and takes a long drink to hide his face from their guests.

“I hope you will all join me in raising a glass to the newlyweds,” Godfrey continues, “and also in encouraging my own sons to hurry up and settle down too!” There is a rumble of laughter around the room. Richard automatically looks to his cousins, who both seem to have developed the same sudden thirst as he has. Godfrey raises a champagne glass, and the rest of the guests lift up their glasses, having evidently been waiting and ready for them. Seigi looks to him, asking silently if he is supposed to do the same, so Richard gives a small shake of his head. “To Richard and Seigi!”

“To Richard and Seigi!” Their names echo around the ballroom as their guests join in the toast. He realises, belatedly, that he might be expected to make a speech of his own, but fortunately Godfrey gives a signal to one of the staff across the room, and the doors are opened to allow a procession of trolleys bearing their first course.

For a while they lose themselves in the chatter of their guests as they are served their food. Seigi turns to talk to his mother, and Richard pretends to focus on his salad while surreptitiously scanning the tables to see who he recognises. There are older relatives he can’t quite name, but who bear a strong enough resemblance to his father and uncle that they must be distant Claremonts, and a couple at a nearby table with distinct trans-Atlantic accents who presumably are related to Anna Marie. Two people at Jeffrey’s table around his own age, he doesn’t recognise at all, and guesses they are either friends or colleagues of his cousin.

It’s barely even his own celebration. If he had planned this himself, could he even fill one of the tables with guests? Saul and his family. Deborah. What attachment does he have to anyone outside of his work, other than Seigi?

The thought sours the food in his mouth, and he refills his glass of water for another drink.

Godfrey nudges his elbow as he finishes up his first course, jolting him as he dabs at his mouth with a napkin.

“I think your guests are hoping you’ll say a few words yourself, Richard.”

“I’m sure your speech was enough.”

“Don’t be rude.”

He sets his napkin back down by his plate. What can he say that isn’t an outright lie, or that won’t result in more gossip when he’s done?

Aware that his uncle is expecting something, Richard finds himself standing, the noise around the room quickly dying down as his guests turn to look at him.

“Everyone,” he begins, suddenly feeling as though every single language he knows has deserted him, “thank you for joining us today. It is true that I have been away from Claremont Hall for several years now, but returning, introducing Seigi to my family, has shown me what is truly important - what I value, above all else. The people I love, the people who want me in their lives. They are worth more to me than anything money can buy. So I am happy that I get to share my life with someone who shares that same belief.”

He reaches out to rest a hand on Seigi’s shoulder, and lifts his water glass with his other hand. The more he does it, the easier it seems to tell a version of the truth that allows people to believe

whatever they choose.

“Everyone should have someone like Seigi in their life,” he says, looking around the room.

“Someone willing to help a stranger in need, someone who cares about doing the right thing. I hope that you all will someday be as blessed as I have been.”

He sits back down, not initiating a toast or waiting for any kind of response. After a moment, there’s a ripple of polite applause that starts with Henry and spreads quickly across the room. That seems to act as some sort of signal to the staff, who begin clearing everyone’s places and setting out plates for their main course.

“Am I supposed to say something?” Seigi asks, leaning in close so that no one else can hear him.

“Only if you want to,” Richard tells him. Seigi shakes his head.

“I’m not sure I’m ready to speak English in front of so many people all at once.”

“No doubt our guests will want to speak to you after the meal. But I will stay with you.”

The rest of the meal is uneventful, and once they have eaten, Godfrey announces that the bar is once again open, resulting in practically everyone swarming to the other end of the ballroom to freshen up their drinks. The saving grace is dessert, which comes in the form of a buffet table loaded with individual servings of more cakes and tarts and puddings than Richard can count. It makes him feel just the tiniest bit ashamed to realise that his aunt really has tried to do something to make him happy today, although he is not quite sure if he can bring himself to thank her directly just yet.

For a while he stays close to Seigi and Hiromi, as one by one the guests come over to congratulate the two of them. But as his relations begin their inevitable questions about where exactly he has been for the past four years, he finds himself separated from them, only able to keep one eye on them as he tries to explain his business in Japan without giving away too much of how he ended up there. More than one person asks what he plans to do with the diamond now that he’s eligible for it, and when he points out that technically it will belong to Seigi, they all somehow have the same answer, that “what’s his is yours, civil partners and all that, eh?” He considers telling one or two that Seigi had thought about breaking the diamond, just to see what reaction that gets, but the last thing he wants is for his relatives to have any reason to distrust Seigi.

It might be the dullest party he’s ever attended as an adult, and the fact that it’s being thrown for him means he can’t slip away to the library the way he might have done as a child at one of these gatherings.

He scans the room, looking for familiar places. His mother is talking with Henry, close to where the string quartet are playing, and they seem to be getting along well enough. Jeffrey is by the bar, with the same people from his table earlier, suggesting that they are actually his guests. Sure enough, one of them whips out a phone and drags Jeffrey and the others in for a group selfie, all raising their drinks to the camera. His aunt and uncle are on opposite sides of the room, each talking with relatives he still can’t name, and Seigi is with Hiromi, apparently acting as translator between Hiromi and a nameless Claremont relative.

Richard snags a plate and fork from the dessert buffet and heads towards them.

“Richard!” The relative, who looks a little older than his uncle, reaches out to shake his hand, but Richard keeps a firm grip on his plate. “Your young man was just telling me he’s studying finance! Perhaps young Jeffrey can sort him out with a job in the city? Then you can both set up home back



in England, eh?”

“Heavens, no,” he says with a smile. “I wouldn’t inflict my cousin on Seigi any longer than necessary.” Instead of waiting for a response, he turns to Seigi. “Darling, have you tried the tiramisu? It’s heavenly.” He spears a chunk of the dessert on the fork and offers it for Seigi to try. Seigi manages to hide his surprise well, opening his mouth and accepting the food with appreciative noises. Richard turns back to the relative. “Thank you so much for coming. Now, if you’ll excuse us, I’d like to talk to my mother in law.”

The relative has no choice but to drift away as Richard turns his back on him. It’s rude, he knows, but Seigi and Hiromi both offer him grateful looks that assure him it was the right thing to do.

“I’m sorry, these family parties can be rather dull,” he tells them both. Hiromi dismisses him with a wave of her hand.

“I’m just a little embarrassed that I can’t really talk to anyone other than your cousin,” she says.

“Trust me, you’re not missing much.”

Hiromi holds up her empty glass.

“Seigi, would you mind getting me some water? The wine is good, but it’s a little strong, and I’d like to clear my head before I go back to my room.”

He takes her glass and heads for the bar, leaving Richard alone with her.

“I really cannot thank you enough for putting up with all of this,” he tells her, his voice low.

“You know, Richard-san, when I came here and heard about why you two were doing this, I really did consider saying no and dragging Seigi back to Tokyo. I understand you know a little of our family history, and why I might be reluctant to let Seigi help you with your plan.” He nods. “But in the past twenty-four hours, I have seen my son speaking to all these important people, in *English* no less, and carrying himself with a confidence and sense of purpose I didn’t know he had. Seigi’s childhood wasn’t the easiest, and while I’ve done everything I can for him, I could never give him opportunities like this.”

“I did promise you that I would ensure that his time away from university would not be wasted.”

She fixes him with a look he can’t quite place; something almost mischievous in her eye.

“You also promised my son that you would take care of him and protect him. I might not know what the rest of the vows were, but I will remember that one.”

Seigi appears at his elbow before he can answer, handing his mother a tall glass of iced water which she accepts gratefully.

“That reminds me,” she says, turning to her son. “Pudding? What kind of a wedding vow is that?”

When, between them, they have managed to explain Richard’s fondness for Seigi’s homemade pudding without making Richard sound too childish, Hiromi’s laughter is one that Richard wants to remember. The way she looks at her son is almost too much to bear; proud and fond and bemused, so much that Richard wonders how she can possibly think she can’t do enough for him.

“I have to leave tomorrow morning for my flight,” she tells them at last, checking her watch. “Is it okay if I turn in early?”

Seigi offers to escort her back to her room, no doubt eager to take a break from the party. Left alone, Richard wanders back over to the buffet table. The wedding cake stands in the centre, three elegant tiers with a cascade of fondant leaves in the same oranges and browns as their suits. They are supposed to cut it together, which will likely take a good while as they pose for more photos and pass out slices to their guests.

But he is tired, all of a sudden. He has been standing for most of the day, and talking for much of it too, and he is certain then that he cannot manage any more.

He beckons to one of the staff, standing behind the table ready to clear plates and offer forks and napkins.

“Could you have one of each of these desserts sent up to my room, in around fifteen minutes?” he asks her. “And a bottle of wine - white, sweet, please.”

She nods, and he thanks her, before slipping around the edge of the room. He reaches the door without anyone stopping him, and when he makes it back out into the hallway, he lets out a sigh that feels like it has been building all day.

He meets Seigi by the top of the staircase, after he has seen Hiromi back to her room.

“What’s wrong?” Seigi asks him, keeping his voice hushed even though there is no one around.

“Nothing,” he says, but he takes Seigi’s elbow and leads him back towards his bedroom, listening out for anyone who might have spotted them leaving. When they make it back, Richard closes the door, then slips off his jacket, loosens his tie, and sits on the bed to take off his shoes. “I simply could not stay in there a moment longer.”

Seigi hovers by the door.

“But aren’t we supposed to cut the cake?”

“It is my wedding. If I want to turn in early, I should be allowed to turn in early.”

“But won’t someone come looking for us?”

Richard purses his lips, before looking at Seigi, trying to hold back a smile.

“They will simply assume that we wanted to enjoy our wedding night. They will leave us alone until the morning.”

He watches, waiting for the moment when Seigi realises what that means. The flush in his face is adorable.

“Oh, ah- they’ll really think that we’re - oh.”

Richard looks around and pats the bedspread.

“Seigi, we have been sharing a bed for the past five weeks. They already think that we’re ‘oh’”.

Seigi covers his face with both hands, but Richard can hear him laughing, just a little.

There’s a knock at the door, a few minutes later, and Richard answers it, thanking the staff and taking the trolley loaded with desserts, and wine and two glasses.

They make a picnic on the bed once again, sitting against the headboard with their shirt sleeves

rolled up and their socked feet almost close enough to touch. After the wine, and the champagne from earlier, Seigi is wonderfully giggly, helping Richard to taste each of the desserts by offering him forkfuls to try, feeding him tiramisu and pavlova and pears with chocolate sauce until even Richard cannot eat another bite. He even reaches out a clumsy hand to wipe a smear of cream from the corner of Richard's mouth, and Richard curses the wine that keeps him from reacting quickly enough when Seigi pops his finger into his mouth to eat it, before slumping, laughing, against Richard's shoulder.

In all the time they have been sharing a bed, they have somehow stayed steadfastly on their own side of the mattress, never once finding themselves tangled together in the morning. Or at least, not as far as Richard knows, although most mornings Seigi has been awake first and Richard has had the blankets cocooned around himself. But for the first time, they fall asleep with their shoulders together, only the bedspread pulled sloppily over themselves to keep warm.

As they doze off, still in their wedding clothes, Richard hears Seigi murmur his name.

"What is it?" He half expects Seigi to start snoring, but somehow he manages to stay awake just a little longer.

"If I have to get fake-married to anyone, I'm glad I got to fake-marry you."

He does begin to snore after that, just a soft little snuffle that Richard is far too tired to comment on.

Richard feels unpleasantly sweaty when he wakes up, his shirt sticking to his back and his trousers pinching around his waist where he never got around to taking off his belt. The curtains are open, the room awash with the grey of an autumn morning, and Seigi is once again already up and about before him. He stretches out an arm, feeling the sudden rush of pins and needles, and notices the unexpected gleam of the ring on his finger. He watches it, turning his hand to make the titanium bands catch the light. He's never really worn jewellery himself. He's not sure if he will get used to it.

"Good morning," Seigi calls out from his seat on the chaise, when he realises Richard is awake.

He mumbles a vague morning greeting before stumbling out of the room to go shower, taking his time to freshen up and find some semblance of alertness. Back in his room, Seigi is still wearing the trousers from his wedding suit, with a pullover and fresh socks, his hair for once tousled from the bed, no doubt thanks to the pomade Richard had applied the morning before.

A breakfast tray has been brought up to the room, and the desserts from the night before already taken away. He begins to feel a little more like himself after a round of toast and some juice, and he accompanies Seigi down the stairs at a little after ten to say goodbye to Hiromi. A car is already waiting by the front door, and Anna Marie comes down to say goodbye too on behalf of the family, giving Hiromi a friendly hug before leaving her to talk to her son.

"You will let me know when you're coming back to Tokyo, won't you?" she says to Seigi as the driver loads her bag into the car. "You should both come to the house, and I'll make dinner."

"I will," Seigi tells her. "It shouldn't be too long. There's just the paperwork for the inheritance to deal with, and then we can come home." He doesn't seem to notice the way Richard reacts to that. But that's how Richard truly feels about it, he realises. They can go home. Together.

They wave her off, and head back inside, to find Jeffrey near the bottom of the main staircase, his phone held to his ear. He is still in the same clothes he wore for the wedding, looking only slightly

dishevelled, and he smiles and waves at them as he finishes up his call.

“I noticed you two had to slip away early last night.” Richard wants to punch the smile off his face. “Henry and I had to do the cake thing, since you left so early. But don’t worry, we saved you a slice each. You wanted the fruitcake tier and not the chocolate, didn’t you, Ricky?”

“Your mother is very keen to get started on planning your wedding too, as soon as you are ready.”

That definitely kills Jeffrey’s good humour, but before he can say anything, Godfrey appears from one of the rooms off the main hallway.

“Ah, good morning,” he calls as he heads their way. “Surprised to see you young chaps up and about before noon.”

“We wanted to see Seigi’s mother off to the airport,” Richard says. Seigi tries to surreptitiously smooth out his hair where it is still sticking up on one side.

“Of course, yes. Lovely women, your mother. Shame she couldn’t stay another day or two.”

Jeffrey interrupts them with a wave of his hand, holding up his phone.

“I’ve just been speaking to Mr Garrett,” he says. “He can be here within the hour to get started on the paperwork, if you’re up for it. Assuming Ricky isn’t too worn out, eh?” He winks, and Godfrey laughs, and Richard wants to punch them both. Instead, he puts an arm around Seigi’s waist.

“You didn’t waste any time, then. Are you that keen to get your hands on it?”

“I just thought you two would want everything wrapped up so you could fly back to Japan as soon as possible. I’m genuinely trying to give you what you want, Ricky.”

They reconvene at eleven, outside the room where the diamond is still kept in its safe, with Mr Garrett and a small security team. Inside, they sit at the low table once again as Garrett goes through the paperwork, telling them where to sign and initial. It doesn’t take very long, but Richard is still very conscious of his cousin and his uncle watching over the whole thing. They haven’t said precisely what will happen in terms of transferring the diamond back to the Claremonts, or in terms of compensation for Seigi, and he is starting to feel just a little unnerved by the whole thing.

Once they have signed every paper that needs signing, Garrett opens up the safe and brings out that stupid little box on its stupid little tray, which he sets down on the table and opens up. Then, while everyone is looking at the gem in varying degrees of awe and admiration, Garrett turns back to the safe, and reaches in to pull out whatever was behind the box.

He hands Richard a bundle of letters. They are ancient, and he fears that the paper might crumble under his fingers, but with care he manages to take out the first one, a letter in faded ink, addressed to his grandfather. He reads it, carefully. Then reads the next one, and the next one. And when he realises what they are about, and why they have been kept in the back of the safe behind the box all these years, he laughs, and he laughs, and he keeps laughing as Godfrey takes the letters from him to see what the hell is going on.

“It’s not real,” he says to Seigi. “You probably couldn’t have broken it after all. It’s not even bloody real.”

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience in between updates. This chapter turned out to be a bit of a monster, clocking in at over 12k words! But there is drama, and suspense, and a conversation between Richard and Deborah that was so much fun to write.

“I don’t understand.” Godfrey sits with his head in his hands, as Richard and Seigi examine the gem. “If that’s the white sapphire, then where’s the diamond?”

“There never was a diamond.” Richard turns the stone over in his hand, watching the way the facets catch the light. “It was a ruse.”

“But why? Why go to such lengths to convince everyone?”

“A test?” Richard suggests. “Or a punishment? Anyone who married for love wouldn’t be disappointed by the truth, and anyone marrying just to inherit the diamond would learn that they had been caught out.”

Jeffrey has been leaning against the wall near the door, his hand over his mouth. Without a word, he turns and leaves. No one tries to stop him.

“No diamond.” Godfrey looks up at last. “But still, a stone of that size - what’s it worth? It’s still got to be worth something, right?”

“An accurate valuation would take time, but if I had to hazard a guess, I’d say within the region of ten thousand pounds.”

“Ten grand? That’s nowhere near - I mean, ye gods, the Triumph cost more than that!”

Richard bites back a comment about how many months’ rent it would cover on Seigi’s apartment. It would be wasted on someone who has never had to worry about rent.

Instead, he says, “Seigi, why don’t you head back to our room? We will need to make arrangements to fly back to Tokyo, and we still have to pack.”

Seigi leaves without complaint, leaving just Richard and his uncle alone with the sapphire.

“So what can we do with it?” Godfrey asks him. “Loan it out to a museum, or something? I mean, so much was dependent on the value of that thing.”

“According to the conditions of the inheritance, it belongs to Seigi, not to the Claremonts.”

Godfrey throws up his hands.

“So that’s it, then? The two of you are going to take the sapphire and disappear back to Japan?”

“Do you still want to keep it in the family, now that you know it’s not worth millions? Not even worth as much as one of your cars?”

Godfrey scowls.

“I want to know that you’re not going to cut yourself off from your family for a second time. Henry’s going to be devastated if you disappear again.”

He softens a little at that. His uncle is right: Henry is blameless in this, and his aunt has only been doing what she thinks is best based on the lies she’s been told. The wedding was their attempt to make amends, so it would be in poor form for him to leave again so suddenly.

“I do need to return to my business,” he concedes. “But I will remain in touch. Perhaps I can arrange a visit. In the new year, maybe?”

“Well, I suppose that’s a start.”

Richard sighs. It feels like a sigh that has been building for a long time.

“For better or worse, I have made a life for myself away from England. I enjoy my work, and the people I work with are important to me. I mean it when I say I will keep in touch, but I cannot give up the life I have made for myself. Nor can I expect Seigi to relocate.”

Godfrey clasps his hands in his lap, looking resigned.

“I suppose it would be too much to ask the two of you to consider staying here permanently.” He lets out a brief bark of mirthless laughter. “Goodness knows your aunt was homesick for ages after we married. Can’t expect your young man to give up everything and stay here.”

Richard gets to his feet.

“I will give you the contact details for my shop,” he says, “and perhaps we can arrange a video call. But you are right - I have no intention, at the moment, of making England my permanent residence.”

When Godfrey doesn’t respond, Richard picks up the white sapphire, and the cloth on which it had sat inside the locked box. He leaves Godfrey alone in the room with the empty safe and the pile of letters.

Seigi is standing in front of the wardrobe in his bedroom when Richard finds him, holding his suit jacket from the wedding and looking anxious.

“There’s no way I’ll be able to pack all of my new clothes into my backpack this time,” he says, sounding forlorn. “I might have to leave some behind.”

“I’m sure I saw some luggage in amongst the wedding presents. We will manage, one way or another.”

“Wedding presents?” Seigi’s face lights up. “So even rich people receive presents when they get married?”

Richard takes the jacket from Seigi’s hand and sets it on the bed, then holds out the white sapphire. Seigi looks at it, then back at Richard in confusion.

“This belongs to you now, according to the conditions of the inheritance.”

Seigi’s mouth falls open, and he shakes his head.

“I didn’t do any of this because I expected to have the stone,” he says. “Don’t your family want it

anymore?"

"Now that they know the truth, I think this stone is a rather uncomfortable reminder of their less favourable values. Besides, I think the fact that you never expected to have it is precisely why you deserve it the most."

For a moment, Seigi still looks reluctant. Then he turns and reaches for his backpack, rummaging in its inner pockets until he pulls out a small, familiar-looking box.

"In that case, I want you to have this." Seigi opens the box to reveal the padparadscha sapphire ring.

"Have you had that in your bag this whole time?" It's entirely the wrong thing to say; he knows this even as the words leave his mouth. But his jeweller's instincts are hard to overcome sometimes, and the thought of Seigi tramping around a strange country with such a valuable object just shoved in his backpack makes him almost sick with worry. "When we get back to Tokyo, I will help you find a safe space to keep your white sapphire." He takes the box from Seigi, and smiles when Seigi carefully accepts the white sapphire with his free hand. "Perhaps we can store them together."

Seigi looks down at the stone in his hands for a moment, before looking back up at Richard.

"Maybe we should have exchanged these at the wedding, instead of rings," he says with a laugh. Richard thinks back over what he's just said, and it's almost like he feels his heart stop for a second.

*Now, you fool, he thinks, tell him now, tell him you meant every word of those vows .*

"Why did you even bring this with you?" is what he says instead, because evidently his mouth and his brain are on entirely different levels today.

"Ah, it's silly. I guess I thought, since the ring helped me to get to know you all those months ago, maybe it would help me find you again."

Richard is not superstitious, but as he looks down at the padparadscha ring in his hand, it's hard to ignore the string of coincidences surrounding it and the two of them. He's fairly certain that the ring will not fit him. But oh, what might it look like against the titanium-and-gold band that Seigi already put on his finger?

There's a knock at the door before that particular thought can get any further, and he pockets the ring box and takes a steady breath before going to answer it, trying to put on his polite face so he doesn't snap at whoever has chosen this moment to interrupt them.

Seeing Jeffrey waiting outside is a genuine surprise. Jeffrey has never knocked on his door and waited to be let in, not even since he came back. For a moment, they stand and stare at each other, the strangeness of this unexpected politeness evidently catching both of them off-guard.

"Can we talk?" Jeffrey says, not quite meeting his eyes.

Richard steps aside and holds the door open for him. He comes inside, but still hovers by the door, where just a day ago he had planted himself on the corner of Richard's own bed like they were still teenagers and the best of friends. Richard hates the awkwardness almost as much as he has hated Jeffrey's overbearing familiarity, but he tries to keep his anger off his face.

"Look, I want you to know that I truly am sorry, Ricky. For everything. I know it's going to take a

lot for me to make amends, and you're probably not ready to forgive me yet. But I want you to know that I am sorry. I have to fly back to New York this evening, but I had to tell you that much, before I go."

Richard can still feel that old, familiar ache in his chest at the memory of Deborah leaving him. Even the rage that had coursed through his veins when he gave Jeffrey a black eye afterwards still lingers. But it has been a long time since then, and the whole thing is about as over now as it ever will be, and he is tired of that anger.

"You realise, then, that the sapphire was a test," he says. "A test that you failed."

"I'm painfully aware of that, yes. I failed you, and Henry, and both of you have every right to hate me. Nakata-kun, too."

Seigi, who has taken up a seat on the chaise longue, looks to Richard, the sapphire still in his hands. He very sensibly remains quiet.

"You assumed that the diamond would somehow fix Henry's health issues, and you assumed that the diamond was more valuable than my happiness. Furthermore, you assumed that Seigi would feel the same way, and pushed him into going along with your plan even though he didn't want the diamond any more than I did."

"Please, Ricky," Jeffrey says, his eyes still fixed to the carpet, "I know I was wrong. Please don't rub it in my face. Just let me know what I can do to start making it up to you."

He is tempted to say that nothing Jeffrey can do can truly make amends, then catches himself.

"Seigi's tuition and rent, until he graduates," he says instead. "And a promise that you will never interfere with my life again."

"Of course."

He's barely recognisable as the Jeffrey Richard used to know. His face is pinched, with noticeable dark circles under his eyes. Is this how he always looks now? Do the smile and the attitude mask so much?

"I have assured uncle Godfrey that I will keep in touch after Seigi and I return to Tokyo," he says, in an attempt to be generous. "And that I may arrange a visit in the new year. But you must understand that it will take time for me to forgive you. Trust is so easily lost, and so difficult to earn back."

"I understand. Look, maybe I can give you my mobile number too. I'm away from the house a lot, but you can still call me. Or even just a text message?" He takes a card holder from the pocket of his jacket, and hands one of his own business cards to Richard, and one to Seigi. "I'm leaving after dinner tonight. Please don't let this be the last time we talk?"

Jeffrey leaves before he can say anything, leaving the two of them alone again. Richard slips the business card into his pocket, feeling the small bulk of the ring box as he does.

"I suppose we had better start looking at flights to Tokyo," he tells Seigi, pulling his laptop out of his bag and setting it up on the desk. "And then, after lunch..." He turns, and gives Seigi a sly look. "How about we open our wedding presents?"



That evening, Anna Marie insists on everyone being at dinner, since Jeffrey is heading back to New York on a late plane and Richard and Seigi are due to fly out the next day. Henry has a never-ending list of questions for Seigi about winter in Japan, and even suggests that he might like to visit Tokyo one day.

Over dessert, Godfrey, who has been rather quiet, clears his throat and sets down his cutlery to let everyone know that he has something important to say.

“Richard, Seigi,” he begins, “we have one last wedding present for the two of you.”

Seigi looks at him a little uneasily. They’ve already opened up all their wedding gifts from the day before, mostly tasteful decorative pieces and matching personal items, little of it truly useful beyond the luggage and two rather stylish shaving kits. No doubt Seigi has been left with the impression that people who have everything they need must resort to the most frivolous of gifts just for the sake of gift-giving.

“I talked it over with your aunt, and with Jeff and Harry, and we all agreed on it. We’re going to pay for your honeymoon.”

He can hear Seigi sounding out the word under his breath to parse its meaning. They’ve talked about honeymoons, briefly, back when they were discussing wedding traditions, but they’ve both been planning to return to business as usual in Tokyo as soon as possible. A fake honeymoon hasn’t been part of their plan at all.

“That’s very generous of you,” he tells Godfrey, “but we were planning on simply returning to Tokyo to re-open Jewellery Étranger.”

Anna Marie leans her elbow on the table, gesturing with her dessert spoon as she talks.

“Now darlings, you really must take time out for a honeymoon! Your uncle and I toured Europe after our wedding.” She turns to her husband and smiles. “Remember Venice, dear?”

“Vividly.” They share a look that has all three Claremont boys suddenly focused intently on their food.

“Richard, your honeymoon is your chance to make the most wonderful memories,” Anna Marie continues, while her sons exchange furtive glances with each other. “It’s time to truly just be *together* as a couple. There’ll be time for work later. But please, let us do this for you.”

“I’ve talked to my travel agent, and he’s going to put together a wonderful tour package for you,” Godfrey adds. “Three weeks, and some of the most splendid cities in Europe. How does that sound, Seigi? Wouldn’t you like to see Athens? Monaco? Paris?”

“That sounds exciting,” Seigi says carefully, and it’s difficult to tell if he’s struggling with his word choices or with hiding his excitement at the offer. “But I d- would not want to, ah, take Richard from his shop.”

“If the two of you go straight back to work, you might not get a chance like this again.”

“Let us do this for you,” Anna Marie says. “We want you to enjoy your time together as newlyweds. And maybe seeing you two happy together will give my boys a nudge towards finally getting married themselves.”

“Mother, please!” Henry whines, as Jeffrey drains almost a full glass of wine in one go.

Feeling his resistance crumbling, Richard looks to Seigi before saying, “I would like to discuss it with Seigi first, if you don’t mind.”

They wait until they are back in Richard’s bedroom before raising the subject, which gives Richard plenty of time to think about travelling around Europe with Seigi; sight-seeing, lunches at street cafés, touring galleries and museums. It sounds like heaven. So of course he ought to say no.

“I really don’t want to keep you from your work,” Seigi says, pre-empting any attempt by Richard to start the conversation. “And your family have already paid for the wedding and everything. I’d feel guilty letting them pay for a three-week holiday as well.”

“They can easily afford it,” he answers. “But a trip like this would be a wonderful opportunity for you. A chance to visit new places, and try new things.”

“That’s true.” Seigi looks down at the floor. “But just being here in England has been a wonderful opportunity. I’d feel ungrateful asking for any more.”

It’s clear that Seigi is trying to hide his enthusiasm about the possibility, which only makes Richard want to give in and give Seigi the trip and anything else he might ever want. If Seigi had said ‘yes’ straight away, Richard might have thought him too opportunistic; that Seigi is reluctant to accept so much simply handed to him only makes Richard want to indulge him more.

“Do you have any commitments which would prevent you from taking the trip?”

Seigi shakes his head.

“I was going to start looking for another job when I got back. There’s my apartment, though - it’s already been sitting empty for over a month. Ah, I’m not sure how I feel about continuing to pay rent on an apartment that I’m not using.”

“And I would not be comfortable leaving Jewellery Étranger sitting empty and closed for much longer.”

“That’s true.” They sit for a moment in silence. “But I would feel bad turning down your uncle’s generous offer. It seems like they’re trying to do something nice for you, as an apology.”

“Turning them down could seem like a rejection of their efforts to make amends.”

“I mean, I *could* talk to my landlord about terminating my lease. It wouldn’t be too hard to move my things back to Hiromi’s, just until I re-enroll at university.”

“Saul did say he could sub-let the shop for a few weeks.”

“It’s just three weeks. I bet you could even find places to buy gems while you were travelling around Europe.”

“They might think it suspicious if we got married and then refused to take a honeymoon.”

They sit for another moment in silence.

“Should I tell my uncle that we accept?”

“Only if you think it’s the right thing to do.”

“Only if you’re sure it won’t cause you too much trouble.”

“Only if *you* feel it won’t have a negative impact on your work.”

“Seigi?”

“Yes?”

“I think we have to accept.”

They fly out from Heathrow the next day, after making arrangements to have their wedding gifts shipped to Hiromi’s house, and after long goodbyes and many promises to call. Richard has a document folder in his carry-on with all the details of their European tour, and Seigi spends the journey to the airport excitedly looking through it and asking questions about the destinations.

The plan is to spend a few days in Tokyo, for Seigi to clear out his apartment and for Richard to discuss with Saul what to do with the shop, and then fly again from Tokyo to Athens to begin their three-week tour. Everything has been planned and paid for, meaning that all they need is to print out boarding passes for each flight. The thought of travelling for pleasure rather than business feels like something of a novelty for Richard. Seigi interrogates him for his knowledge of each city on the tour, whether Richard has been there before and whether he can speak the language. The prospect of taking Seigi on the trip, of showing him the sights and watching him trying new foods, visiting new places, and being able to relax away from the pressures of university and family commitments feels like a dangerously wonderful daydream, one that he feels almost guilty for indulging in.

Arriving at Haneda airport gives Richard a surprising sensation that he can’t quite place. It feels a little like relief, a little like assurance, until Seigi picks up his suitcase from the luggage collection and says with a smile, “I’m home.”

Richard smiles, and in the middle of the airport he tells Seigi, “Welcome home.”

They stick together as far as the train station, where Richard waits with Seigi for his train to arrive.

“Where will you go?” Seigi asks as they wait on the platform. It’s too late to go to the shop, and the flight and the time difference mean that Richard has effectively lost an entire day. Unlike Seigi, who managed to nap on the plane, Richard hasn’t been able to let his mind rest, thoughts flitting between meeting Saul, the future of his business, and the prospect of taking Seigi on ‘honeymoon’. All he wants is to find a bed, and possibly find food along the way.

“I will get a hotel room,” he tells Seigi, with what he hopes is a reassuring smile. “There are a couple that I use regularly, which usually have a room available. Are you going back to your mother’s?”

“Nah, I’m gonna go back and check that my apartment’s okay. I’ll call Hiromi tomorrow and explain about the trip. I’ll ask her if it’s okay for me to move my stuff back to her place for a while, until I’ve got some work lined up for the rest of the year.”

“Do tell her that she may call me if she has any questions about where we’re going. Feel free to give her my number.”

Seigi looks down the platform; the display indicates that his train is just two minutes away.

“It’s going to be strange sleeping in my own bed again, after all this time,” he tells Richard with a laugh.

“Enjoy it. I’m sure you’ll appreciate having the space to yourself.”

“Ah, but it’ll be weird not seeing your face before I fall asleep. It’s been good for my heart, getting to see you first thing in the morning when I wake up.”

Richard frowns, automatically glancing around to see if anyone has overheard. But then he remembers why Seigi told him that the first time, and softens a little.

“Perhaps we can talk on the phone later. So I can make sure everything is okay at your apartment.”

“I’d like that.”

By the time Richard has checked into a hotel, eaten dinner and changed into pyjamas, it is well after ten. He pulls back the sheets, climbs into bed, and realises after a few seconds of trying to get comfortable that he has confined himself to just one half of the mattress, forgetting that Seigi isn’t there to take up the other side. He scowls at the empty room, then shuffles over, rearranging the pillows into a stack against the middle of the headboard, spreading out his arms to revel in the space.

As tired as he has felt all evening, he expects to fall asleep almost immediately. So the more he tosses and turns against the pillows, the more frustrated he becomes. Eventually, he picks up his phone from the bedside table and starts to check the local news, to see what he has missed while he’s been away.

When even the financial news doesn’t put him to sleep, he pulls up his contacts list, hesitates for a moment, then types out a message to Seigi.

*Is it too late for that phone call?* He asks. Seigi, far more practical than he, is likely asleep already. He has turned out to be the kind of person who can fall asleep within minutes of laying down, and Richard wants to hate him for it. *I can call tomorrow instead, if you’d prefer,* he adds.

A few seconds slip by, and Richard decides it’s best to put his phone back and try to sleep. But Seigi’s message lights up his phone before he can do that.

*I’m still awake. You can call if you like.*

“How was your apartment?” Richard asks, when Seigi answers his call. “I hope everything was okay.”

“It was okay, except I had to throw out the food I’d left in the fridge. I’ll be sure to plan ahead better next time I go away.”

They spend a while talking about the flight, and about how it feels to be back in Tokyo. Seigi surprises him by asking if he can keep up his English lessons even now that they’re back, and they talk for a while about the places they’ll be visiting on their trip and whether Richard will be able to speak the local language there.

He’s yawning by the time he hangs up, barely even awake enough to put his phone back onto the nightstand. Strange, he thinks, how they can still find so much to talk about even after spending all day together.

Richard sleeps late, and still feels groggy after a long shower and a hotel breakfast. The temptation to give up on the day entirely and sit in bed with a book is strong, but he cannot put off his meeting with Saul; not if he needs to request an extension to his leave.

As he's getting ready to head out, his phone lights up with a message. When he sees Saul's name on the screen, he feels a brief moment of disappointment. It takes a second to work out that he was hoping it might be Seigi.

*Foolish*, he thinks, and *Maybe accepting the trip was a mistake*. But he tries not to dwell on it.

Saul's message is a request to meet at a café in Ginza, instead of at the shop. He recognises the name of the place, although it's not one he's ever been to. When he arrives, five minutes early, Saul is already there, sipping a cup of black coffee so strong Richard can smell it from across the table. Sometimes he thinks Saul must drink such bitter drinks to make fun of his preference for sweet tea.

"I was expecting you to bring your husband," Saul says by way of greeting. "Have you abandoned him so soon?"

Once again, Richard finds himself glancing around to check that no one has overheard. There are always people glancing his way when he's out in public, and especially today since neither of them are Japanese, but no one seems any more interested in him than usual.

"We are not joined at the hip," he says, as snappily as he dares. "And you know full well that the partnership was simply for the sake of the inheritance. Seigi is at his apartment."

Saul raises an eyebrow as he sips his drink. Whatever his opinion is, he seems to be making a show of keeping it to himself.

"So you have inherited the famed Claremont diamond after all."

Richard allows himself a grim smile.

"There is no Claremont diamond."

"Oh-ho? Did your part-timer go through with his plan to smash it to pieces after all?"

He gives Saul a succinct run-down of the events of the past few days, focusing on the revelation of the will and trying not to dwell on the wedding. Throughout his story, he watches the change of expressions on Saul's face, finding a strange sort of comfort in Saul's ability to give him his full attention and find the important truth to focus on.

"And how are you feeling, after all this drama?" he asks, as Richard leans back in his chair.

"Satisfied, in a way I really did not want to be? Knowing that the sapphire was a test, and my family failed it, I suspect I ought to feel triumphant. But it just reminds me of all that wasted time spent trying to distance myself from them. And having gone through with my cousin's plan for a civil partnership that was entirely unnecessary, now I have to make a decision about how to end it without causing any harm to Seigi or allowing my family to suspect our ruse."

"Do you want to end it?"

Richard gives Saul as stern a look as he dares.

"Seigi should not have to be tied to a relationship he doesn't want. He did this out of the goodness

of his heart, with the expectation that we would quietly dissolve the partnership once the inheritance was dealt with.”

“But do *you* want to end it?”

“Seigi is in love with someone. Or fancies himself in love with someone, at least.”

“Oh, I know.”

Richard feels his eyebrows raise in surprise that he can’t hide quickly enough. He knows that Saul and Richard have met, but neither of them have told him much about their meetings, or how well they have come to know each other.

“He talked to you about Tanimoto-san? I suppose I shouldn’t be so surprised - he does have a tendency to moon over her a little more than is appropriate.”

Saul makes a face that he can’t quite read, before he turns to wave over one of the servers. Richard orders a mineral water and a croissant, and a second coffee for Saul, and the break in the conversation allows him a moment to decide how best to bring up the subject of their trip.

“It seems as though Seigi and I are to continue pretending to be a couple for a little while longer, though,” he begins once the server has left them. Saul leans back in his seat and motions for him to explain. “My uncle, in an attempt to make amends for my cousin’s interference in my relationships, has insisted on paying for a ‘honeymoon’ for myself and Seigi.”

“Oh?”

“A three-week European holiday. The Claremonts are rather fond of the tradition of The Grand Tour, and want Seigi and I to have some time together before we return to work.”

“I see. And are the Claremonts not aware of your business commitments?”

Richard waves a hand to indicate his family as if they are on the other side of the room, not the world.

“The Claremonts see business as a thing that happens *for* them, you know that. My uncle employs people to manage his company, and Jeffrey - well, I couldn’t tell you what it is Jeffrey does these days apart from fly around the world and appear on social media, and yet somehow he earns a tidy sum from it. The concept that I run my business myself is not one they seem able to comprehend.”

“So is this a request for more time off?”

He sighs, and nods.

“Seigi and I discussed it, and we agreed that turning down my uncle’s offer would appear ungrateful, and would do nothing to mend the rupture in my relationship with my family.” He breaks off as the server returns with his drink and an almond croissant, which he begins to tear to shreds, powdered sugar sticking to his fingertips as he pulls off a piece small enough to eat. “Henry, my eldest cousin - I do intend to keep in touch with him, and my aunt and uncle, although they were absolutely far too ready to ignore Jeffrey’s actions, have at least tried to make amends. They have done what they thought was best, based on Jeffrey’s lies about my relationship with Seigi.”

Saul sips his coffee, watching Richard pull off another piece of pastry to eat.

“And what about your shop?”

“Have you been working from there? I do feel terrible about keeping you from your own home.”

Saul tugs at the tip of his moustache.

“As it happens, I found someone willing to sublet the unit for a short time. An art dealer, who is considering setting up in Ginza permanently and needed a base of operations to get a feel for the place before committing to a long-term lease. Perhaps I can speak with them and offer them an extension?”

“That would be very much appreciated.”

“So where is your uncle sending you and your husband for your honeymoon?”

Resigning himself to being teased for the foreseeable future, Richard begins outlining the trip to Saul as he finishes his croissant. He mentions a few particular landmarks and galleries he’d like to show Seigi, and listens to Saul’s suggestions too. Then Saul sets his cup down, looking as though he’s about to announce something.

“If you truly do feel bad about being away from your work for so long, perhaps we could schedule some appointments during your time in Europe? This might be a good opportunity to make some new acquisitions.”

He picks at the last bit of pastry on his plate. Making the holiday a working trip might be a good idea; it could certainly help to quell his ridiculous daydreams of the trip proving a catalyst to romance, and remind him that he is Seigi’s employer above all else.

“That could be a good learning experience for Seigi,” he says. “Although he has been present for sales and valuations, he has not yet been able to see what is involved in building stock. I’m sure he would appreciate the opportunity.”

“Oh? I thought your part-timer was there to help with house-keeping and filing?”

He allows himself a rueful smile.

“That had been my original intention. But Seigi has proved himself a quick study, with a genuine interest in both gems and the business. Even if his customer service skills need a little refinement. Certainly, many of my customers have taken a liking to him.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

Saul gives him another of those inscrutable looks.

“The part-timer you took on for house-keeping and filing followed you halfway around the world simply because he was interested in your work?”

“He followed me because he is reckless and impulsive. You do remember I told you he planned to shatter a multi-million pound diamond?”

Saul sets his cup down on the table, and settles back in his chair, tugging at his moustache again.

“I think this trip will be good for the two of you,” he says, before he signals their server for the bill.

After he leaves Saul in Ginza, Richard travels to the bank where he has a business account, and makes a request to store some items in a deposit box. Along with two staff members, he locks away the white sapphire and Seigi's padparadscha ring, trying his hardest not to look too fondly at the two little boxes nestled together before they are locked away. He takes lunch at one of his favourite restaurants, where the staff recognise him instantly and tell him how glad they are to see him again, before taking a walk around some of the stores.

He purchases a couple of sets of work-out clothes and some new running shoes, and a towel and a water bottle. Then, he heads back to make use of the hotel gym for a couple of hours. Surprisingly, he hasn't put on any weight while he's been in England, which he puts down to eating Seigi's cooking instead of restaurant food, but when he gets on the treadmill he can tell that it's been too long since he last exercised properly. He is sweating and winded just from an easy run, but he enjoys the ache in his muscles, and switches over to the weight machines until his arms are shaking and he can taste the sweat on his lip.

Back in his hotel room, he showers and changes into casual slacks, with a pullover on top of his shirt. He has nothing else lined up for the rest of the day, and settles on to the bed, hoping to read for a while. But he finds it hard to keep his attention on his book for more than a minute at a time.

Since there is no one around to hear him, he doesn't hide the long sigh that has been building as a sign of his boredom, before picking up his phone. He opens up Seigi's number, thinks for a moment, and types out, *Would you like to meet for dinner this evening?* before pressing 'send'. Then, he adds on, *I can update you on my meeting with Saul, and his plans for the shop.*

It doesn't take long for Seigi's reply of *I'd like that!* to arrive, so Richard takes a chance and presses 'call'.

"How are you?" he asks, when Seigi answers.

There's a moment of silence, before Seigi tells him, "Good, everything's fine here." He decides not to question it; after all, Seigi is likely busy packing up his apartment, and he might very well have interrupted. "How are you?"

"Happy to be back in Tokyo, even if it is only for a few days." He goes on to tell Seigi about his meeting with Saul, and about putting the sapphire and the ring into safe storage, then listens to Seigi talking about packing up his apartment. Then there's another moment of quiet, before Seigi asks him, "Did Saul say if anyone had asked for me at the shop?"

"No? Were you expecting someone there?"

"Ah, no, no. It's nothing, don't worry about it. So dinner tonight?"

"Where would you like to go? I'm happy to come over to a place near your neighbourhood, to save you a journey if you've been working hard."

"No! No, it's fine, I don't mind getting the train." There is something in his voice that feels a little off, but Richard decides not to push it. He wonders, briefly, if Seigi is embarrassed at the thought of Richard seeing where he lives, after having seen the opulence of Claremont Hall. "Wherever you want to go is fine."

They end up in Shiseido Parlour, and Richard is heartened by its familiarity. He can't help thinking of the bundle of receipts that used to live in his wallet, from all the meals he'd shared with Seigi before he left. He will have to start saving up again, now that so many of them have been littered around the floor of the British Museum like breadcrumbs.



Seigi seems okay at dinner, dressed in one of the pullovers Richard bought him in London. He talks at length about packing up the contents of his apartment, and about calling his mother to explain the trip.

“I told her that the wedding presents would be shipped to her house too,” Seigi says in between mouthfuls of food. “Although I don’t know what we’ll do with most of them. I mean, they’d look out of place in any apartment I rent.”

“We can make decisions about each of them when we return,” Richard suggests. It wouldn’t so bad if they sold one or two, he reasons, to give Seigi a little extra income. Perhaps some things could furnish the kitchen at Jewellery Étranger. “How does your mother feel about you going away again?”

“She lightened up a little when I said it was a gift from your uncle and aunt. She agreed that it would have been rude to turn them down, and said maybe I should make the most of the opportunity to travel while I can.”

“Wise words.”

As Seigi talks, Richard finds himself watching his mouth, noting the ways it curves when he smiles, the fullness of it when he is quiet. It is strange to sit in Shiseido Parlour, where they have sat together a dozen times before, and think, *I have kissed that mouth, I know how it feels against mine*. He remembers, too, the feeling of Seigi’s hands in his, and when he looks down, he notices a familiar flash of gold.

“You’re still wearing your ring,” he says before he can stop himself.

Seigi sets down his spoon and looks at his own hand.

“Ah, I guess so. I didn’t know if I should take it off once we left England, and then I thought that, if I did, I might lose it somewhere. Oh, you have yours on too.”

Richard has found himself glancing at the titanium band on his own finger whenever his mind has been unoccupied. Although he had taken it off to shower that morning, he had looked at it for a while, sitting beside the sink, and thought about how sad it would be to put it back into a box and keep it hidden. Even though it is only metal, it is a fine piece, and does not deserve to be hidden away after such a short time.

“I suppose I thought the same.”

He walks Seigi back to the train station after their meal, trying not to think about the gold band on Seigi’s hand, or about how it would feel to hold that hand in his own again. Now that they are back in Japan, he needs to make an effort to resist the bad habits he built up in London, which means no more taking Seigi’s hand when he wants to express something important.

“Would you like to meet again tomorrow?” he asks, as they wait on the platform. “If you’re not too busy, that is. And if you don’t already have plans with your friends.”

“I did make plans to meet up with some people at lunch, but I don’t have much more packing to do. I was mostly going to spend tomorrow cleaning, so it would be nice to have a break in the evening.”

“Then it’s settled,” he says with a smile. “I shall meet you for dinner again. Call me when you’re ready, and I will see if Saul will relinquish the car to me for the evening.”

The next day drags a little, without any work to do. He purchases a day-pass for a gym and runs on the treadmill until his legs threaten to give out, then looks around until he finds a free heavy bag and a rack of boxing gloves, and burns off what remaining energy he has on the bag, before sitting in the steam room until his muscles stop aching.

The workout feels like justification to treat himself with something sweet at a café. After lunch, he decides to do a little shopping, picking up some suitable holiday clothes. It feels like a shame that they are taking their ‘honeymoon’ in late autumn instead of the summer; then again, the prospect of seeing Seigi in shorts or swimwear feels like more than he can reasonably handle. He sends a text message to Seigi, asking if there is anything he might like Richard to pick up from him for their trip, then follows it with a string of suggestions. Seigi doesn’t answer immediately, but Richard assumes that he is busy cleaning his apartment. Belatedly, he wonders if he should have offered to help, then decides that he probably would be more hindrance than help, and gives up on feeling guilty about it.

By four o’clock, he is bored of the city, and heads back to his hotel room, planning to attempt once more to read for a while. But his phone, sitting on the bedside table, keeps taunting him. Seigi still hasn’t replied to his messages, which is unusual. Eventually he sets his book down and picks up his phone, opening the conversation between Seigi and himself. His messages have been seen, but there is still no reply. Briefly, he thinks about calling, but catches himself; Seigi had said he was planning to meet with friends, so it’s entirely possible that he is simply out enjoying himself. Richard fights down a sharp, hot flare of jealousy at the thought, and instead opens up another set of messages.

Deborah had replied to his message, on the morning of the wedding, and somehow he hasn’t made the time to answer her. This helps to appease the sting of Seigi’s lack of a reply, as he remembers how easy it is to forget to keep up a conversation like that.

*I’m back in Tokyo, he sends. Let me know when it’s convenient for you, and I’ll call.*

He is three pages on in his book when his phone begins to ring. Yet again, he feels his heart sink when it isn’t Seigi’s name on the screen, but seeing Deborah’s name instead appeases him a little.

“Guten morgen,” she says, and he can hear the smile in his voice. “Or is it Konbanwa? What time is it there?”

“Half-four,” he answers, looking at his watch. “So guten morgen to you, good afternoon to me.”

“Or ‘hello’. That works.”

“Hello, Deborah. How are you?”

“Busy. But when am I not these days?”

Even over the phone, she’s still so easy to talk to. He marvels at how simple this is, with Deborah, and how they can go months without actually hearing each other’s voice but still pick up like they just saw each other yesterday.

“So what happened in England?” she asks, and he hears what sounds like a door closing on her end of the line. “You told me you were thinking of giving up on Tokyo for good, and now you’re back again? Was there drama?”

He laughs, and almost misses the sound of an engine in the background.

“Are you driving? I can call you back later, if you’d prefer.”

"I'm just setting off to work, but don't worry - you're hands-free."

"Well, if you're sure."

"Stop stalling, Rich!" She laughs again. "What is it you're putting off telling me?"

He sighs, and pinches the bridge of his nose.

"I'm not sure where to start, without making it sound like a soap opera."

"Okay, well, you told me you'd gone back to see your uncle. Something about withdrawing money from your English account?"

"Right. I had to get his consent, to supplement a purchase for a client. But, ah, I had personal reasons, too."

"Family stuff? Oh, no, did someone die?"

"No, no, it wasn't like that." He leans back against the headboard, stretching his legs out on top of the sheets. "I mentioned my part-timer before, right?"

"Nakata?"

"Yes, Nakata Seigi. Uh. I don't know how to explain this."

"What?" He can picture her, the faux-stern face, urging him to get to the point.

"God, Debs, he's like if someone made a human out of sunshine and sugar and labradors! And I was absolutely rotten to him - leaving without telling him, because he'd run off to confess to a girl from university."

"Oh my god! You have a thing for your employee!"

"And I ran off back to London, thinking I could get some distance and get over it, but he followed me!"

"What?"

"He packed a bag and got on a plane all the way to London, to track me down and bring me home."

He hears a thumping sound down the line, and assumes she's slapping the steering wheel, the way she used to slap pub tables and rattle their glasses when she found something hilarious.

"That's not a soap opera, that's a romance! That's Mills and Boon-worthy!" She laughs, and Richard can't help but laugh a little, at the ridiculousness of it all. "So are you two a thing now? Did he sweep you off your feet and whisk you back to Japan?"

"Oh god no, that's only the start of it!"

He crosses his ankles, and leans further back on the bed, an arm outstretched on the pile of pillows, getting comfortable as he prepares to tell her the story. She listens as he explains about Jeffrey tracking Seigi down, making entirely the wrong assumption about their relationship, using Seigi to lure Richard out, and about the loophole Jeffrey had found in the will.

"And he was willing to go along with it?" she asks him, when he pauses in his story. He can hear

the sudden sharpness in her voice, and remembers then his own disappointment when he too had thought Seigi had been taken in by the promise of riches.

“He even fooled me for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s bound to sound ridiculous when I say it out loud. But it’s what happened. Oh god, Debs, that boy! He had it in his head that he would go along with Jeffrey, then get his hands on the diamond and smash it to pieces. He thought, if he could break it, then there’d be nothing to inherit and I’d be free of the Claremont family curse.”

She swears. She must be impressed, he reasons, if she’s actually reduced to swearing.

“Can you break a diamond?”

“With the right directional force, yes. But he didn’t get a chance.”

“So, what happened?”

“Well, Seigi had agreed to Jeffrey’s plan because he thought it would help Henry. Oh, I didn’t tell you about Henry, did I? I could barely believe it when I saw him - I knew he’d been ill, but I didn’t realise how badly. And since neither of us had contradicted Jeffrey’s assumption about our relationship, we reasoned that coming clean after all that would only make things worse. We discussed it, and agreed that going ahead with the civil partnership was the course of action that would cause the least harm all around.”

“I take it back. This is definitely a soap opera. God, Rich, how on earth do you get yourself into these situations? Falling for your employee, fake marriage, an inheritance you actually ran away from and still ended up with.”

“It’s not as if I go looking for these things to happen.”

She’s quiet for a moment, and he tries to picture her face as she no doubt focuses on the road. He wonders if she still clenches her jaw too hard when she concentrates, or still gets that little line between her eyebrows when she frowns.

“So was it worth it?” she asks. “Getting fake-married for the diamond? Or fake-civil partnered, I suppose.”

“God, Debs, I haven’t told you the worst part yet.”

“The worst part?”

“Careful. I don’t want you to crash the car when you hear this.”

“Tell me!”

The diamond was fake.”

There’s a pause, before she speaks again.

“Fuck.”

“Well, it was a white sapphire. Identical to the untrained eye. But if Seigi had tried to shatter it like he’d planned, we probably would have found out the truth a month ago, instead of having to endure

a whole wedding ceremony in front of my family and relatives I haven't even thought about in years."

"Bloody hell, Richard. You know, this is why we should talk more often - so I can deal with this stuff in stages instead of getting an entire saga all at once."

"Sorry. Ah, there is one more thing."

"Of course there is."

"My uncle wanted to make amends for all the trouble they've caused us, so they insisted on paying for a honeymoon. We're flying out to Athens in three days."

For a few seconds, he can only hear the sound of her car engine over the line. Then it cuts out, and she begins to laugh.

"It's not funny."

"It's bloody hilarious!" She keeps laughing. "I had to pull over just so I could laugh without running the car off the road! You ran away from your family because they wanted you to inherit a rock the size of your own head, ended up on the other side of the world, developed feelings for your employee, ran away again, and then ended up getting fake-married to him to inherit the diamond that wasn't even a diamond, and you still have to stay fake-married so you can go on a fake honeymoon." She barely finishes the last bit, dissolving into laughter once again.

"It's not funny."

"Have you at least confessed to Mr Sunshine-And-Puppies?" He doesn't answer. "Please, Rich, after all this, you at least need to tell him how you feel."

"He's still in university, Debs. He's 20."

"And are your parents the same age?"

"Not a good argument, considering they haven't spoken in years. Besides, Seigi is in love with someone else. Or thinks he's in love with someone. I've spent too many hours listening to him pine over her."

"Have you met her?"

"I've seen her, once."

"And?"

"She's perfect for him. Same age, sharp as a pin from the sounds of it. She even has a thing for gems and mineralogy."

"He's in love with the girl version of you?"

"I'm beginning to think I shouldn't have told you any of this."

She chuckles, but her hysterics have settled down, and the warmth is back in her voice when she speaks again.

"Don't you feel glad to have got all that off your chest? I'm guessing you haven't actually told anyone else how you feel about him?"

Richard sighs, and switches his phone to the other ear.

“Saying it out loud helps a little,” he admits. “I think it has helped me put things in perspective, in as much as I know I need to get over it.”

“So you’re not planning on confessing while you’re on your fake-honeymoon? No moonlit stroll on the beach where you tell him the stars aren’t nearly as beautiful as his eyes?”

“It’s a bit too cold for moonlit beach walks at this time of year, even in Athens.”

“Good point. Try over dinner with champagne.”

“I’m not going to confess.”

“Why not? If he’s willing to follow you halfway around the world and pretend to get married to help your sick cousin, that sounds like he’s got some kind of feelings for you.”

He sighs once again, tipping his head back until it bumps against the headboard.

“He’s in love with someone else, remember? And she’s far more suitable for him than I am. You know what I’m like, Debs. For the past four years, I’ve wondered if I’m even capable of having a relationship. For all I know, this is just an infatuation with the first person who’s been genuinely good to me in years, and I’ll get over it in time.”

“Well, I’m probably not the person you should seek relationship advice from.”

“You mentioned you’d met someone. How’s that going?”

“Good, I think? I’ll have to tell you about him another time.”

“Right, sorry, I don’t want to make you late for work.” He hears the engine start again as she pulls the car out from wherever she’s parked. “I can call you after our trip, if you like.”

“I want a postcard. Is it three weeks in Athens, or are you doing the good old Grand Tour?”

“The Tour.”

“Bloody rich people.” There’s humour in her voice, but he knows what she means. She’s told him enough stories about her gap year travelling through Europe that he knows he never wants to step foot inside a youth hostel, but he also knows that the experience is one she wouldn’t trade for anything.

“I’ll send you a postcard,” he assures her. “And thanks. For letting me unload all of this. I know it’s a lot. I’m a lot.”

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re sweet to lie. I’ll let you know when the trip is over, and perhaps we can schedule another call?”

“I can’t wait.”

They say their goodbyes and hang up, and Richard truly does feel better for having talked to her. Now that someone else finally knows how he feels about Seigi, it actually does feel like a more manageable problem.

His phone feels warm from the long call, and he really ought to set it down. But there is still no response from Seigi.

Trying to quell his anxiety, he dials Seigi's number. He's half convinced it will just ring out, so he's not prepared for Seigi to answer after the first ring.

"Is everything okay?" Richard asks, trying not to sound worried. "You didn't respond to my messages."

"Ah, sorry, sorry! I guess I just got caught up with cleaning my apartment."

"Oh. I assumed you were still out with your friends, since you said you were meeting them for lunch."

"Right! I had lunch, then got stuck into the cleaning. I guess the day just slipped away from me." It might be a bad line, but it almost sounds as though Seigi is walking outside.

"Well, if you are ready for a break, I can meet you for dinner wherever you'd like."

There's a pause, and Richard is certain he hears a car drive by wherever Seigi is. He tries not to dwell on it; perhaps Seigi just has a window open.

"Actually, would you mind if we pushed it back until tomorrow?" Seigi asks. "Uh, I'm pretty tired after so much cleaning, and I don't think I'll be very good company."

"You are always good company," Richard says, before his brain has time to catch up with his mouth. "But if you'd rather not go out tonight, I could take you to lunch tomorrow instead."

"That might be better. Thanks."

"Alright. Why don't you call me whenever you're ready tomorrow, and I will meet you somewhere."

"Okay, sure."

"Make sure you get some rest, Seigi. Sleep well."

"Uh, you too."

He has little inclination to go out to eat alone, but the thought of staying in all evening feels even worse. In the end, he calls Saul and offers to take him out to dinner. It's worth having Saul call him "my pupil" in front of the restaurant staff to not spend the night alone, worrying about Seigi.

Richard sleeps late again, after a restless night, and lingers over breakfast for as long as the hotel staff let him. It's been such a long time since he had more than one free day in Tokyo, and he feels rather at a loss for what to do. He is able to collect his workout clothes from the hotel's laundry service, and buys himself another day-pass at the gym, where he tries out as many of the cardio machines as he can until he feels about ready to drop.

It's after noon when he's showered and changed back into his good clothes, but there is no word from Seigi about meeting him for lunch. He sends off a message to remind Seigi to call him, and heads out into the city. But an hour of aimless wandering and window-shopping passes without any reply, and he ends up getting a table in a café so he can calm his nerves with something sweet.

While he eats, he sends Seigi another message, asking if he'd prefer to meet for dinner instead. He finally gets a reply about half an hour later, just as he's starting on his second dessert.

*I've had to go back to Hiromi's, Seigi sends, so can we meet up tomorrow? Sorry, there's just more to do than I anticipated.*

Richard has spent the past four-and-a-half years travelling light, ready to move on at the drop of a hat. It's likely that there is a lot more to moving out of a home than he had anticipated, and maybe Seigi really is just swamped with work. Once again, he feels guilty for not offering to help, but it's outweighed by his concern. It's not like Seigi to ignore messages, or put off so many invitations to eat out.

He tells Seigi it's no bother, but to make sure to rest and to say hello to Hiromi for him, then pockets his phone. But he cannot ignore his worry.

With Saul due to fly back to Sri Lanka now that the sub-let on the shop has been extended, Richard is truly alone in the city again. Maybe it's the sudden change from spending all his free time with Seigi, but he feels so much like a loose thread, in danger of being cut off entirely. No amount of window-shopping and reading can keep him distracted enough from worrying about what is going on with Seigi.

Back in his hotel room that evening, he tries to ignore his phone, instead sitting with his laptop open to plan things to do while they are in Europe. But his eyes keep glancing that way, as much as he tries to focus on the computer screen, and eventually his phone is back in his hands.

If he calls Seigi, there is every chance he will come across as overbearing, or that Seigi will be annoyed with him for interrupting his time with his mother. But he cannot shake the feeling that something is wrong, that Seigi is keeping something from him.

He does have Hiromi's number, though. Would it be too much to call her? He could just say he wanted to thank her for coming to the wedding, and apologise for the inconvenience of having their wedding presents sent to her house.

That would be acceptable, surely.

He dials her number before he can second-guess himself. She answers after a couple of rings, and sounds pleased to hear his voice, which brings a smile to his face in the empty hotel room.

"It's no trouble," she assures him when he explains about the wedding gifts being shipped to her. "Seigi's old room is still empty, so they can go in there."

"Has Seigi arrived at your home yet?" he asks, trying to keep the worry from his voice. "He told me he was coming to see you today, and I just wanted to check that he had arrived safely. He had to cancel our lunch plans today."

"Seigi's not here," she says, and immediately there is concern in her voice too. "He told me he was seeing friends this evening. He called me to tell me about your trip, and that he was packing up his apartment - his things arrived here this morning, and I asked if he'd be bringing you over for dinner before you go away again, but he said he had lots to do in the city."

"I see." He rubs a hand over his forehead, and tries to keep his voice even when he speaks again. "Perhaps I misunderstood."

"That doesn't sound like Seigi. I can't think why he would tell you he was here if he wasn't. I can try to call him, if that helps?"



“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. But, ah, if you do, I would appreciate it if you could let me know that he’s okay.”

He ends the call feeling even worse than when he picked up his phone. When he dials Seigi’s number, it rings out unanswered. When he dials again, a minute later, Seigi’s number is out of reach.

Saul has given him back the keys to the Jaguar, and he leaves the hotel to collect it from the long-term car park where it’s been sitting. It does, thankfully, have a full tank of petrol, and the familiar feel of the driver’s seat and the purr of the engine help to keep him calm as he sets off towards Seigi’s place. Although he’s only been there once before, when he dropped Seigi off after a long night of driving through the rain, he’s got the address memorised.

It’s late evening when he reaches Seigi’s neighbourhood, and most of the houses and apartments have their lights on. He parks the car within sight of Seigi’s apartment complex, and sits for a while. He doesn’t know which window is Seigi’s, so it’s impossible to tell from this distance if Seigi is at home or not, but he’s reluctant to go up to the door.

But there are pedestrians passing by, and at least one curtain is twitching, and sitting there any longer would be suspicious. So he gets out, and heads over, trying his best to look casual. He counts along the row of doors, and when he works out which one is Seigi’s, he’s dismayed to see someone standing outside it. He tries to ignore the man and his cloud of cigarette smoke as he walks up and knocks on the door; besides, the light in the window is off, so he decides that he will only wait a few seconds before leaving.

“He’s not home yet,” the man tells him, letting out puffs of smoke as he speaks.

“I see,” says Richard. “Thank you. I shall try another time.”

“He’s been out a while, but he should be home soon.”

“Thank you.” Presumably the man is Seigi’s neighbour and therefore accustomed to his schedule. He turns and heads back to the car, away from the unpleasant smell of tobacco. It’s tempting to sit and wait in the car, just in case the neighbour is right and Seigi comes home soon. But he doesn’t want Seigi to think he is stalking him.

It’s another restless night, as Richard tries not to dwell on any of a dozen different scenarios: Seigi in trouble with his landlord for cancelling his lease at short notice; Seigi avoiding Richard so that no one finds out about the wedding; Seigi being cut off from his friends because they know he married another man. It’s early in the morning when he eventually falls asleep, and late when he wakes, groggy and bad-tempered. He rouses himself enough to shower, trying not to look at the dark circles under his eyes when he catches his reflection in the mirror.

This time he doesn’t stay long at breakfast, eating quickly before going back out to the car. He drives back over to Seigi’s apartment, parks up nearby, and sits there for almost an hour. There is no sign of Seigi, and no sign of life in his apartment. Either he left before Richard arrived, or he hasn’t been back all night.

Feeling a genuine wave of panic creeping up on him, Richard pulls out his phone. He’s about to dial Seigi’s number, when he changes his mind and goes through the settings to hide his number before he calls. Seigi’s phone is on but there is no answer. He hangs up, waits a minute, and dials again.

This time, Seigi picks up after a couple of rings.

“Hello?” His voice is tentative, almost as though he didn’t want to answer.

“Seigi, it’s Richard.” He hears Seigi let out a long breath. “What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing, really,” Seigi insists, but he is not convincing. “Something just came up. Can I just meet you at the airport tomorrow?”

“Seigi, please, whatever the problem is, I’d rather you tell me. I’m not going to be angry with you.”

“Really, Richard, it’s nothing to worry about.” There’s a muffled sound, and then it seems as though Seigi is running for a couple of seconds, before he speaks again. “Look, I promise I will be at the airport tomorrow, really. I’m packed, and I have my passport ready. I just can’t see you today.”

He hangs up before Richard can say anything. When Richard dials again, it goes straight to voicemail.

He swears, and throws the phone into the passenger seat.

There is nothing he can do. No one he can call.

He drives back to the hotel, and tries to make a start on packing the clothes he needs for their trip. That doesn’t take too long, and does nothing to appease his worry. Feeling desperate, he opens up his laptop and tries a couple of internet searches. But Seigi has no social media presence, and a guilty search for the names of his friends reveals nothing either. He manages to restrain himself from looking through Tanimoto’s account, once a quick glance shows no mention of Seigi’s name and no pictures.

Just as he’s about to close the laptop, he spots a notification from Jeffrey. In need of a distraction, he opens it up, and finds he has been tagged in someone’s photo.

It’s from the wedding. One of the group selfies he saw Jeffrey’s friends posing for, with himself and Seigi in the background. Whoever took the picture has managed to capture the exact moment Richard fed Seigi a piece of cake in order to fend off one of his relatives.

He types out a quick, terse message to Jeffrey: *Please ask your acquaintance to un-tag me from their photo. I do not wish to see my private moments on someone else’s social media.*

Almost immediately, the message shows a read receipt. A few seconds later, his phone rings.

He grabs for it, disappointed yet again when the name on the screen is not Seigi’s.

“Jeffrey,” he barks into the phone, “I am not joking. Please tell Binky or Jonty or whichever one it was to remove that photograph of my wedding. We wanted privacy.”

“Ouch, Ricky, no need to bite my ear off for it.”

Richard pinches at the bridge of his nose; he can feel a headache coming on, and his cousin’s attitude is far from helpful.

“I apologise,” he manages to say. “For once, it’s not you I’m angry with.”

“Oh? Trouble in paradise already? You’ve barely been married a week. Where is Nakata-kun?”

“I don’t know, and that’s the problem.” Although Jeffrey is not someone he would generally choose to confide his fears in, right now there is no one else to listen, and someone needs to know how worried he is. “He was packing up his apartment while I stayed in the city, but he’s not been responding to my messages. We had plans to meet for dinner, but he kept asking to reschedule, and now he says he won’t see me until we’re due to fly to Athens.”

He hears Jeffrey suck in a whistling breath, and tries to picture his cousin’s face, wondering if there might be genuine concern there.

“You don’t suppose he’s nicked off with the sapphire, do you?”

“Impossible. It’s in a deposit box at the bank. I haven’t seen him since to tell him that.”

“Well, that’s a relief, at least.”

“Jeffrey, I am worried about Se- my *husband*. I don’t give a damn about the sapphire right now.”

“Leave it with me,” Jeffrey tells him. “I’ll see what I can find.”

He hangs up before Richard can ask what he means by that.

Richard spends a couple more minutes staring at his laptop, opening up the Jewellery Étranger mailbox, before going back to the social media accounts of the one friend of Seigi’s whose name he can remember. Shimomura Haruyoshi has a slightly more active presence than Tanimoto, but even that has no mention of Seigi. He’s contemplating sending the man a message, when his phone pings once again.

*Binky took down the photo*, Jeffrey has sent. It doesn’t bring any relief.

A moment later, there’s a second message. *Thought you might enjoy these instead, though.*

There are photos attached, which take a while to load. Professional photos this time, from the wedding. He flicks through them, his breath catching at the memory of Seigi in his suit: he saves the picture of the two of them with Hiromi, swipes past another posed photo of the two of them with Jeffrey and Henry, and then stops. The last photo Jeffrey has sent is one of the ‘candid’ ones from their walk around the winter garden. In it, he stands with his left hand pressed lightly to Seigi’s cheek, the light catching his wedding band just so. Their eyes are fixed on each other, soft smiles that look far too intimate to have been caught on camera.

His breath catches in his throat as he looks at the photograph. He wants so badly to believe it, the way their wedding guests believed. The Seigi in the photograph can’t possibly be someone who would run away from him. That Seigi wouldn’t lie to him.

Feeling an uneasy tightness in his throat, Richard closes the picture, wiping at his face with the back of his hand until the stinging in his eyes fades.

Unable to sit still any longer, he heads back out to the car.

He parks up near Seigi’s apartment again, and sits and watches well into the afternoon. There is no sign of Seigi. At a little after three, the neighbour from last night appears near Seigi’s door, and lights up another cigarette, leaning against the wall to smoke. After a while, Richard sees the man raise an arm to wave at him.

He starts up the engine and drives away.

Richard drives Seigi's neighbourhood in as logical a path as he can manage, weaving back and forth to make sure he doesn't stray too far from his starting point. When he begins to feel hungry, he ignores it. When his bladder begins to complain, he parks up near a little hole-in-the-wall noodle bar, goes in and orders the first thing on the menu, uses their bathroom, and leaves again before the food ever appears.

It's getting close to seven when his phone chimes again. He's almost given up on hoping for it to be Seigi, but he still feels his stomach drop when it's Jeffrey's name on the notification.

When he opens the message, it begins with an address, and a link to a map location which turns out to be an Internet café about a mile from Seigi's place.

*This was about fifteen minutes ago*, reads Jeffrey's message. He knows he ought to question how Jeffrey got the information, but that can wait for later.

He drives back towards the location Jeffrey has given him, parking up outside the café and dashing inside. As he goes in, he pulls out his phone and opens up the photo of himself with Seigi and Hiromi, zooming in until the screen shows only Seigi's face.

"Has this man been in here today?" he asks the first staff member he sees, holding up the phone for them to see. Infuriatingly, they won't even look at the picture.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't give out information about our customers."

He bites back his anger, and instead turns to look around the place. There is no sign of Seigi, so he turns again and rushes back out to the car. He circles the block, weaving back and forth, wishing for some sign of Seigi and hoping that he hasn't arrived too late to find him.

He's just about to turn a corner when he spots Seigi's green parka; ignoring the driver behind him, he wrenches the wheel and swerves the other way, to where Seigi is walking hurriedly along the pavement, dragging his new suitcase behind him. Richard pulls the car to a stop and reaches over to wind down the passenger-side window just as Seigi draws level with the car.

"Get in," he calls. Seigi stops walking, but doesn't move towards the car.

"I can't," he hisses. "You need to leave."

"Get in, and we can both leave. You can tell me what's going on later, if you need to."

"I said I'd meet you at the airport, and I meant it, but please, don't stay here."

Seigi sounds more terrified than angry, and Richard can feel his heart hammering even though he still has no idea what Seigi is trying to hide from him. He switches on the car's hazard lights and climbs out, stepping around the hood and on to the pavement.

"Whatever is happening, Seigi, I just want to know that you're safe."

"Seigi-kun, there you are!" a voice calls, before Seigi can answer. Richard can see the fear on Seigi's face as he steps back, towards Richard and away from the man who is now hurrying down the street towards them. "I'm so glad you stopped. Now we have a chance to talk."

"No!" Seigi backs up another step, almost bumping into Richard. The man comes to a stop between Seigi and the car, which he looks over with an appreciative eye before looking at Richard.

“Damn nice car, this is.”

He smiles, and as Richard catches a whiff of stale tobacco, he realises where he recognises the man from.

“Who is this, Seigi?”

The man leans an elbow on the roof of the Jag, and looks at the two of them.

“I thought you looked familiar when I saw you last night, and that ring on your hand confirms it.” His smile grows wider. “I’m Seigi’s father. I guess that makes you my son-in-law.”

## Chapter 10

“I saw pictures of the two of you on a news site,” the man says, with a leer that makes Richard clench his fists almost without thinking. “They used your new name, but I knew it was you, Seigi. Someone translated it for me, and it said you were getting married. All the way in England! Imagine keeping a secret like that from your father.”

Richard steps forward, putting himself between Seigi and the man who claims to be Seigi’s father. Since Seigi hasn’t denied it, he has to assume that this is indeed the man Hiromi divorced.

“What do you want?” Richard asks, his voice steely. Although he has little idea what actually passed between Seigi and this man, it is clear that Seigi is afraid of something. He takes another step towards the man, hoping that his height advantage might at least intimidate him into backing off a little, but he leans against Richard’s car as though it is his own.

“I haven’t seen my son in years,” he says, gesturing towards Seigi. “I’ve been looking for you for so long, Seigi, and then someone told me you could find lost relatives on the Internet. I spent hours in net cafés, but I finally found you.”

“I was never lost,” Seigi spits from behind Richard. “There’s a reason why we kept away from you.”

The man clicks his tongue, and shakes his head.

“A boy should know his father, Seigi. I know you’re not so heartless as to cut me off completely. We have a chance to get to know one another again, and you can tell me about this man too.” He nods towards Richard, with a sickening smile.

“You don’t want to get to know me. You just want someone to mooch off of.”

Seigi’s father gives Richard a very obvious appraising look, before looking past him at his son.

“The news site made it sound as though the person you married is from a very wealthy family. You have a fancy title back in England, it said. You’re a lord, or something, aren’t you?” He looks back at Seigi and bares his teeth in a grin. “Are you using his name now, Seigi? You know, we’re not so different, you and I. I made you, after all.”

Richard hears Seigi retreat behind him again, and he takes another half-step towards the man.

“I’m not like you,” Seigi says, and Richard can hear the tremble in his voice, a fear he has never imagined Seigi capable of.

“Oh? What’s it like, being shackled up with a rich man? I wonder what your friends would think. Do they know, Seigi?”

Richard steps forward again, but the man keeps on leaning against his car, in no hurry to move.

“What is it, exactly, that you think you’re going to get from Seigi?” A threat of blackmail is something the Claremont boys have been prepared for since their school days, but being caught in the face of such a brazen attempt is unsettling; he finds himself fighting dual urges to hit the man and to take Seigi’s hand and run.

“Don’t you think, sir, that a kid ought to take care of his old dad?” The man reaches into his pocket

and pulls out his pack of cigarettes and a lighter, and as he lights up it becomes clear to Richard that he is so certain that he is the one with the power here. “I provided for him when he was a boy, and now I think it’s only fair that he returns the favour. Now that he’s married into money, you know.”

Richard stands firm, resisting every urge to punch this man square in the nose, and says instead, “You are right. I do have money.”

Seigi’s father looks surprised for a second, then he slips back into that lascivious grin.

“And I’m sure you’re a generous fella too, willing to help out a man who just wants to see his son.”

“I have money to hire the best lawyers, who will help me to take out a restraining order if I feel that someone is hassling my husband.” He watches as the smile begins to slip from the man’s face. “I even have money to hire my own personal security, who know where I am at all times and are but a phone call away, should I need to deal with a problem in a more...physical way.”

He takes his phone from his pocket, and begins to dial.

“You wouldn’t,” the man says. He straightens up, stepping away from Richard’s car at last. “You wouldn’t threaten an old man. I just want to see my son. Seigi! Seigi, you wouldn’t let him do that to your father, would you?”

Seigi says nothing; just steps closer to Richard, slipping an arm around his waist. Richard holds the phone up to his ear.

“Would you like to stay and find out?”

Seigi’s father takes a step back, and then another. When it becomes clear that Ricahrd isn’t going to back down, he turns, dropping his cigarette and fleeing down the street. Richard watches him until he turns the nearest corner, then pockets his phone.

Seigi is still clinging to his jacket, and when Richard turns around, he doesn’t resist as Richard’s arms wind around him and hold him tight.

He shushes Seigi’s murmured apologies, simply telling him, “I’m just glad you’re alright,” before bundling him into the car. The suitcase gets stowed in the boot, before Richard climbs into the driving seat and takes them back to the hotel.

Seigi is quiet during the drive; almost unnervingly so. He has seen Seigi upset, and angry, and ill, but this Seigi, who seems utterly terrified even after the danger is gone, is entirely new to Richard. Although Richard knows none of the details of Hiromi’s separation from her first husband, it doesn’t take much imagination to guess, based on the way Seigi has reacted to seeing his father.

When they get back to the hotel room, Seigi heads straight to the bathroom and locks himself inside. Richard leaves him alone, stowing Seigi’s suitcase neatly beside his own, before calling down to order food and drinks to be sent up. While he waits for it to arrive, he sends messages to both Hiromi and Jeffrey, letting them both know that he has found Seigi, and that he is alive and well, before switching off his phone and leaving it to charge.

“Seigi?” He knocks once on the bathroom door, after their food has been sent up. “There’s dinner, if you’re ready to eat. And hot cocoa.”

He steps back, and after a moment he hears the soft snick of the lock on Seigi’s side of the door.

“Cocoa?” The door opens just enough to reveal Seigi, still in his coat, wiping at red-rimmed eyes and sniffing.

“It seemed appropriate.”

Seigi accepts the drink, sitting on the edge of the bed at Richard’s instruction, with his coat still on. He drinks in silence, and Richard doesn’t push for him to speak. When his cup is empty, he lets Richard take it from his hands and set it aside. When Richard asks for his coat, he shrugs it off and hands it over for Richard to hang up by the door. His movements are stilted, and Richard suspects that if he hadn’t said anything, Seigi would still be standing silent by the bathroom door.

“I’m sure you know that I want to talk about what has happened to you,” Richard says, eventually, when he decides it’s time to give Seigi a push. He sits down on the bed next to Seigi, not so close as to crowd him, but not so far that he can’t reach out for Seigi’s hand, if the urge should strike him. Seigi nods, then draws a long and ragged breath.

“I’m sorry for the trouble I caused you.”

Richard purses his lips, and clasps his hands in his lap.

“I won’t lie and say I don’t feel angry right now,” he admits, keeping his voice low and even. “Mostly, I am angry at that man and the pain he has obviously caused you, and a little angry with myself for not insisting on staying with you while you packed up your apartment. But Seigi, you must understand that if you close yourself off and refuse to let others help you when you are in need, it hurts those who care about you.” Seigi nods, and Richard can see him biting his lip. “It has become apparent to me that you are reluctant to ask for help, perhaps because you feel that you shouldn’t be a burden to others or that you alone are responsible for your problems. But there are people who care a great deal about you, who want to help you when you are in need.” He takes a breath, and thinks very carefully about what he is about to say. “I count myself among those people. Seigi, I promised that I would protect you and take care of you in whatever way I could. Even though the wedding was largely a show for the sake of my family, those words came from me.”

“I didn’t want him to know about you,” Seigi says, his voice rough and uneven. “He’s the sort of man who would say, ‘a kid’s money belongs to their parents’. If he knew you, and knew you had money, he’d - I mean, you heard what he said to you.”

“And if I hadn’t been there today? Would he not have said the same thing to you?”

Seigi opens his mouth, but the sound that comes out isn’t even close to a word. His eyes squeeze shut, and he covers them with a hand, turning his face away from Richard. Richard wonders if he should give Seigi space again, to work through this until he is ready to speak, but something about this strikes him in a familiar way that it takes a second to place. He remembers sitting in a different hotel room, much sparser than this one, with everything he owns packed into a suitcase standing by the door. He remembers Saul, too, sitting on a chair with Richard’s passport in his hand, waiting for Richard to explain himself. He remembers fighting back the urge to cry, and turning his face away from Saul while he composed himself.

He reaches out for Seigi’s hand, the one with the gold ring, and holds it for a moment.

“You are not a burden, Seigi, and you deserve help and support when things are difficult. Trying to be independent is admirable, but there are things we simply cannot deal with alone; things that could cause genuine harm if we tried to face them alone. For as much as I can, I want to help you face those things. That is why I felt angry - because I tried to reach out to help, and you decided



you were better off alone. What if I hadn't been there to help today? Do you think, if some real harm befell you, that I would be okay? That I could just go back to business as usual? If he had done something - just as, if you had gone through with your plan to break the diamond and been arrested for it - do you think I would have been better off for that?"

Seigi's free hand goes up to cover his face, his mouth twisting around a choked sound, before Richard pulls him close enough that he can hide his face on Richard's shoulder. Richard holds him tight and lets him cry, and tries not to think about that stark hotel room in Sri Lanka, and what might have happened if someone had let him cry then.

It takes a while, and a few breaks for tissues, but Seigi's story spills out in fits and starts; how his father had turned up near his apartment the day after they got back to Tokyo. How Seigi had been overwhelmed by memories he'd spent so long trying to forget, of a childhood spent hiding and fighting, and how eventually he'd reached a point where he could go days without even thinking about his father until, the very day after they got back to Tokyo, he'd gone out to the local convenience store and seen the man, just sitting on a bench, like he'd always been in Seigi's neighbourhood. Seigi explains how his father had somehow got his phone number, and how he'd stopped answering his phone in case it was him. How he'd thought that, by keeping Richard away from his apartment, he could keep his father from hassling Richard. He lets Seigi cry some more, holding him when he needs to hide his face, and making soothing sounds when Seigi has to catch his breath or blow his nose.

When he's done, Richard hands him another tissue to wipe his eyes, and ushers him back to the bathroom to shower and get ready for bed. He changes into his own pyjamas while Seigi is in there, and then settles in with his book; he has made very little progress with it these past few days, despite the rare free time, but once again he struggles to keep his attention on the page, thinking instead about what he might say to Seigi to help him feel better. Richard suspects that this problem might be too big even for him to help with, and that perhaps Seigi might be better off talking to a professional therapist. He's never been good at dealing with other people's emotions, and even with such a strong desire to help Seigi, he still isn't sure he's been doing or saying the right things so far.

"I'm sorry, dinner must have gone cold," Seigi says when he comes back out of the bathroom. Richard sets down his book, still unread, and goes over to collect the tray that arrived earlier.

"Not at all," he says, bringing it over to the bed. "It's sandwiches and cold desserts, since I didn't know how long you might need before you were ready to eat."

They sit side by side, leaning against the headboard, and set to work on the food, which seems to bring Seigi around a little. Richard talks him through the schedule for the next day - they have a few hours between checking out of the hotel and checking in at Narita airport, and Richard suggests they enjoy a leisurely lunch and perhaps do some shopping, if there is anything Seigi needs to pick up for their trip.

"Do you need to return your apartment keys?" he asks, as he picks up a plated serving of cake. He breaks off the corner with a fork, but doesn't take a bite just yet. Seigi is still a little sluggish in his movements, still working on his sandwich, pulling the bread into small pieces to eat a little at a time.

"I already handed them back yesterday, so don't worry about that."

"Yesterday?" Richard almost drops the plate in his hand. "Where did you sleep last night?"

"An Internet café."

Richard bites his lip, trying to remind himself that Seigi had been acting out of fear, not logical thinking, and that he doesn't deserve to be scolded yet again. He takes his mouthful of cake, using the action to quell the sudden flush of anger.

"What's done is done," he says once he's swallowed the cake. "In future, Seigi, please remember my promise. I will do what I can to help, without judgement."

Seigi manages a nod, and picks at his sandwich some more, his jaw tightly clenched and his chest rising and falling with measured breaths.

"I want to do better," he manages, eventually. "I think it might help, knowing that you've said that. Knowing that I can tell you about - about when things like that happen."

"I want to say that I hope nothing like this happens again, but realistically, there will be times, in our futures, when we need some support, or simply to talk about something. Perhaps we should strive to be that support for each other."

The corner of Seigi's mouth twitches upward, in what might almost be the start of a smile.

When it comes time to turn in, Richard switches off the main light but leaves the bedside lamps on, not quite ready to lay in total darkness with Seigi just yet.

"You know, you can change your mind about the trip if you want," he tells Seigi, as he climbs into bed beside him. It occurs to him, far too late, that perhaps he should have booked another room for Seigi. But then he remembers Seigi telling him how reassuring it was to see Richard's face first thing in the morning after being away from him for a month, and he understands. After the past few days, trying to reach out to Seigi and failing, it will be good to feel that familiar weight on the other side of the mattress as he falls asleep.

"I think I want to go more than ever, now." Seigi stifles a yawn, and in the warm lamp light Richard can just see the dark circles under his eyes.

"Mm. Perhaps some rest and relaxation in a new place will be good for you."

"He doesn't know about the trip." Seigi turns over to face the middle of the bed. He doesn't quite look at Richard. "He won't be able to follow me."

After a moment of second-guessing himself, Richard turns on his side too. They've never talked in bed like this. The room feels small, as though nothing else exists beyond the edges of the bed.

"If you feel it would help, there are legal measures I can take to ensure he doesn't try to contact you again. I wasn't bluffing when I said that."

Seigi's eyes squeeze shut, and Richard feels a twist of anxiety as he wonders if that was entirely the wrong thing to say.

"Can I think about it when we get back from the trip?" he asks, opening one eye. Richard nods, and Seigi's face softens a little. "I want to just not think about him for a while."

They lay in silence for a minute or so, and Richard thinks it might be time to turn off the lamps. Then Seigi speaks again.

"Sometimes, when I was younger, I used to think about - if I died."

"Seigi!"

“No, I mean - if I died, I might get reborn. I’d think about what kind of life I might live, if I was born into a different family. I used to think I wanted to have any other life except my own.” He shifts his head on the pillow, as if trying to get comfortable. “But now, I’m beginning to think that maybe this life might be the best one for me after all.”

“Oh?”

“It’s in this life that I got to meet you.”

Seigi’s left hand, the one with the gold and platinum ring, rests on the mattress between them, just centimetres away from Richard’s own hand. How many times now has he taken Seigi’s hand in his when they’ve talked about something intimate? How easy would it be, now, to nudge his hand over just a little, to close that gap between them and cover Seigi’s fingers with his own? To feel that gold band against his own skin?

They are in bed, he reminds himself, and Seigi is still recovering from an intensely traumatic experience. His hand says where it is, careful centimetres away from Seigi’s, on his own side of the bed.

“I think,” he begins, mindful of his voice in the small space, “that if I were to be reborn as someone else, I might want to be someone like Nakata Seigi.” He sees Seigi’s eyes grow wide, sees the flush on his cheeks that would be imperceptible if they weren’t so close. “Someone willing to cross the world to help someone in need. I think that’s an admirable life to live.”

Seigi’s eyes squeeze shut, but he doesn’t seem about to cry this time. While he’s not looking, Richard nudges his hand a fraction closer, mere millimetres from Seigi’s. They are in bed, he reminds himself, and touching Seigi right now, even in a gesture of comfort, is inappropriate. But when Seigi uncurls his hand, and his fingers brush against Richard’s, purely by chance, Richard does not pull away.

Neither does Seigi.

Richard uncurls his fingers a fraction more, as he settles his head into the pillow ready for sleep. Seigi’s fingers slide into the spaces between his. Richard keeps his eyes on the places where they are connected, counting the faint creases on Seigi’s knuckles until he falls asleep.

Due to the time difference, they land in Athens earlier than when they left Tokyo. When Seigi stirs from his nap, Richard gets the pleasure of watching him try to wrap his head around the extra hours they have gained by flying westward, as they leave the airport in the late afternoon sunshine. It’s November, so it’s not exactly beach weather, but it’s milder than England would be, and Richard enjoys the feel of the sun on his face as they wait for a taxi.

Although Seigi is still a little distracted at times, he seems to be faring well enough after his misadventures just yesterday. Anyone who didn’t know him as well as Richard would likely not notice anything out of the ordinary at all. But Richard sees how he checks over his shoulder every few minutes, how he takes an extra second or two to reply when someone speaks to him, and how fidgety he is as they stand in line, only settling down once they get a cab and begin the drive to their hotel.

Richard checks them in, his Greek passable for the occasion, but the receptionist switches to English to address both him and Seigi, once she has their reservation details on her computer.

“Welcome, both of you,” she says with a wide smile. “You’re here on your honeymoon, yes?” Richard nods - Seigi repeats the word under his breath, sounding it out the way he did when Godfrey first mentioned the idea to them, and then he too smiles and nods at her. “We have your room ready, and your bags will be taken up for you. We have a welcoming gift prepared for you both, and it says here that arrangements have been made for you to take dinner in your room. Is seven o’clock a good time for you both?”

“Yes, thank you.” Richard accepts the room key and a small bundle of pamphlets about local tourist attractions.

“Is it Mr and Mr Claremont?” The receptionist looks from her computer to Richard. “I can see the reservation was made on your behalf by someone else. I just want to check that we have the correct name.”

Richard draws a breath to correct her, ready to explain ‘Ranasinghe deVulpian and Nakata’, when Seigi interrupts.

“Yes. We are Mr and Mr Claremont. Thank you.” He gives her a broad smile, and Richard finds himself too taken aback to question him.

In the lift, once the doors are closed, he turns to Seigi, ignoring his own repeated reflection in the mirrored wall behind him.

“Explain yourself?”

Seigi laughs, and ducks his head.

“We’re supposed to be a couple here, right? I thought, if we said we had different names to the ones your uncle gave, maybe they might not believe us. What if that got back to your uncle?”

Richard pinches the bridge of his nose.

“The hotel staff are hardly going to send a report of our behaviour back to my uncle.”

“Oh. But, ah, maybe it could be fun to pretend?”

“What happened to wanting to remain as Nakata Seigi?”

“I’m still Nakata Seigi back in Japan. But maybe here, it might be fun to be Mr Claremont? I might never get the chance to travel like this again. I want to make the most of this opportunity. Like when we were Edward Baxter and Yamada Seiji for a day.”

He’s still smiling. Richard still doesn’t quite understand his reasoning, but it’s hard not to smile back when Seigi seems so happy compared to the day before.

“It doesn’t bother you now, for people to think that you are in a relationship with a man?”

Seigi chews on his lip for a moment, watching the floor numbers above the lift door.

“I’ve had plenty of time to think about it, since meeting Mami-san and Tatsuki-san,” he begins. “How, when we were in England, no one thought there was anything out of the ordinary about two men being together. So I reasoned, I shouldn’t think there’s anything out of the ordinary about it either. Two people in love are two people in love, no matter what gender.”

The lift slows and stops, and the door beeps as it opens to let them out into a short hallway leading

to their room. Seigi takes the tourist pamphlets from him while he fiddles with the keycard, trying three different ways before the door unlocks as Seigi starts talking about all the things he wants to see while they're in the city. But he trails off when he finally gets inside the room and sees where they will be spending the next three nights.

"It's like a whole apartment!" Seigi drops his carry-on bag and walks into the open-plan space, looking around at the sleek curved couches and the stylish dining area, before heading over to the french doors and opening them up to reveal the balcony. Richard smiles at his reaction; he's stayed in hotel suites before, but this is grand even by his standards. His uncle certainly hasn't shown much restraint in his planning.

A bottle of champagne has been placed on the dining table, along with a vase full of fresh red roses, and a box that turns out to be chocolates. Presumably this is the 'welcome gift' the receptionist mentioned. All very romantic, if Richard can remember to tamp down the scolding voice that reminds him that this is all a sham.

Richard finds both their suitcases, which had been brought up while they were checking in, and wheels them over towards the bed, where he pulls his toiletry bag out and takes it into the bathroom. He sets it down by one of the twin sinks, and thinks for just a second about what it will be like in the morning, seeing Seigi's matching kit there next to his. He wonders, just for the briefest moment, about playing along with Seigi's make-believe game, playing at being Mr and Mr Claremont for the next three weeks, and whether his heart might be able to hold up to it.

"Richard, come look at the view!"

He heads back to the balcony, smiling as Seigi gestures with wide arms at the admittedly stunning view of the city. From this high up, they can see quite a distance, and they are perfectly situated to be able to watch the sunset in the evening, if they choose. Seigi leans on the railing with both arms, and Richard feels his breath catch in his throat at the way the late afternoon sun warms his skin.

*I would give you sights like this every day for the rest of my life if I could see you smile like that*, he thinks, before scolding himself for such hopeless romanticism.

"Why don't we take a walk before dinner?" he says instead. "I'm sure you'll enjoy seeing the city much more from down there, instead of from all the way up here."

They change into clean clothes before heading out, keen to be free of their stale aeroplane clothes after the long flight. The sun is just beginning to set as they leave the hotel, and Seigi stops a couple of times to take pictures of the pink-washed clouds, before they settle into a comfortable walk towards the seafront.

The harbour lights in the early evening are postcard-pretty, and Seigi snaps another photograph before they find a small collection of street food vendors. They end up sitting on a bench sharing loukoumades, laughing at the sweet stickiness before Seigi runs back to the stall to fetch paper napkins and a bottle of water to clean their honeyed fingertips. Richard watches the way he smiles, and wonders at the contrast between this Seigi and the Seigi that cried in his arms just the day before. How many times has Seigi smiled like that while trying to hide some secret fear or sad memory? It makes his chest ache, swollen fit to burst with the love he feels for him, with the need to replace all of Seigi's sadness with smiles just like this one.

When it is properly dark, they make their way back to the hotel, a slower walk this time as Richard pretends he knows the way, covering up a wrong turn by pointing out some interesting architecture and asking Seigi what he knows about the history of Greece. By the time they get back, the walk and the loukoumades have properly primed Richard's appetite for dinner, and he graciously thanks

the concierge when she tells them that their meal will be sent up to their room shortly.

The small dining table in their suite has been set for a meal, with the champagne put on ice and the flowers and chocolates moved to the desk at the side of the room. While Seigi goes to wash up, Richard waits to accept the trolley full of food that one of the staff brings in, thanking him and tipping him a few Euros as he leaves.

"I'm ready to eat," Seigi announces as he joins Richard at the table. Watching his face as his meal is laid before him is a delight, and Richard realises he hasn't even looked at his own plate until Seigi is several mouthfuls into his food.

They take their dessert out on to the balcony, along with the champagne. Richard shows Seigi how to uncork it properly, and then fills both their glasses.

"Should we toast?" Seigi asks before he drinks. "Isn't that something you're supposed to do with champagne?"

"Only if you want to. It's not required."

Seigi watches the bubbles in his glass, and Richard watches his face, warm and smiling from the good food and fresh night air.

"I feel like we should. But I don't know what to say."

Richard thinks for a moment, about the trip, and what it means for Seigi to be here.

"How about, 'To new opportunities'?"

Seigi smiles at that, and repeats it, before clinking his glass carefully against Richard's, and drinking. The sweet effervescence is pleasant, until it reminds him of the morning of their wedding, of drinking Bucks Fizz with his aunt, and of hearing his uncle calling on the family to celebrate their relationship, and the taste sours in his mouth as he swallows. *This isn't real*, he reminds himself. *You can play along for now, but remember that this will end.*

When they have finished dessert, they take their glasses and lean on the balcony railing, side by side, drinking and looking out over the city. At first Seigi seems happy enough, listening to Richard talk about the things they might do while they are in Athens. But as they empty the champagne bottle and drain their glasses, he starts to notice a distant look on Seigi's face, and he becomes a little quieter, a little slower to respond to Richard's suggestions for trips and excursions.

"Is something wrong?" he asks, when Seigi ignores his offer of a boat trip the following afternoon. "If you're tired, we can turn in for the night."

"No, I'm not tired. I guess I should be - it's probably morning already in Tokyo."

"Is there something you'd like to talk about?"

Seigi looks down at his hands where they rest on the balcony railing, tapping his fingers a few times.

"This is all...such a lot," he says, looking back towards the room. "I started wondering about how much this all cost. I know I shouldn't, and I don't want to seem ungrateful, but still. This is a lot, for someone like me."

"It's rather a lot for me too," Richard tells him, nodding towards the room. "I am used to hotel

rooms when travelling for business, but even I don't usually stay in suites like this one." He hears his voice coming a little slower, a little thicker than it should; half a bottle of champagne, even with food, is more than he's used to. He puts a hand on the balcony railing and wonders if it's the height making his head spin, or the drink, or the way Seigi's face looks in the dark.

"Everyone's been so nice, so generous." Seigi turns back to look out over the city, leaning to rest his elbows on the railing. "I keep reminding myself that this is to make up for the trouble with the daimo- I mean, the sapphire. That this is just your family's way of trying to make things up to you after they hurt you. But for me? I don't know."

"I treat you to meals, and trips. Does that feel like too much?"

Seigi shakes his head.

"When you take me to somewhere like Shiseido Parlour after work, it's like - like a senpai treating his kouhai after a good practice, you know? I can accept that. But all of this - I feel like - almost like a fraud. I'm pretending to be Mr Claremont, and it's fun, for now, but I keep expecting someone to catch me out." He looks down again, his mouth still twitched up at the corners, but his eyes are downcast, and Richard can hear the tightness in his voice. "How did I end up becoming someone who travels the world, and stays in hotel suites and drinks champagne? That's not me. I appreciate it, but I think, sometimes, that someone is going to appear and tell me it was all a mistake. That I ought to pay back everything I've taken. I just keep thinking that I don't really deserve all of this."

The sad smile on Seigi's face is more than Richard can bear. His hands reach out for Seigi's shoulders, as if to shake some sense into him, but he stops when Seigi's eyes go wide at the sudden movement. Instead, he steps closer, his hands sliding up to Seigi's face, thumbs brushing his cheekbones.

"You deserve everything," he says, "and I will keep giving it until you realise that. You deserve to be taken care of. You deserve kindness and tenderness, Seigi, and you deserve to be-" He breaks off as Seigi's eyes squeeze shut, and he catches a tear with his thumb before it can slip down Seigi's cheek. Richard wonders if this is too much, if he should back off, but Seigi's hands reach for him, slipping around his waist to pull him closer.

Maybe it's supposed to be a hug, but as Richard feels Seigi's chest press against his, he can't help himself. He tilts his head until his lips brush Seigi's, and when Seigi does not pull away, he presses further, until they are kissing; Seigi's hands tighten on his shirt as Richard holds him close, kissing his mouth, his cheek, his neck. How long has it been since he last dared to touch someone like this? Since he was willing to let someone else put their hands on him? His skin burns with the long-buried need to be touched, to hold Seigi against him as if someone is trying to drag him away.

"Is this-" he breathes against Seigi's mouth, "can I-" and "do you-"

"Yes," Seigi says, and "please-" and Richard does not hesitate, kissing and kissing him until his breath runs out, his hands in Seigi's hair and their foreheads together as he fills his lungs before diving once more to taste the champagne on Seigi's tongue. If Seigi has really never kissed anyone before him, it barely shows, as he responds to Richard's mouth with eager devotion, tilting his head back for Richard to kiss his jaw, his throat, his temple and back to his mouth again until his lungs burn for want of air. He puts his forehead to Seigi's, their mouths barely brushing as they find their breath, and feels Seigi's hands still twisted tightly in his shirt.

Suddenly aware that they are out on the balcony where they might be seen, Richard turns and backs up, leading Seigi back into the bedroom with his hands on Seigi's arms. They really ought to

stop, to talk about this. But Richard has spent years alone, and the long-buried desire for someone to hold him like this has resurfaced like the hunger pangs of a starving man. He needs Seigi's mouth on his, Seigi's hands on his skin. Instead of talking, he surges back into Seigi's arms for another kiss, turning him and walking him over to the bed until Seigi's knees hit the mattress and he drops down, pulling Richard with him, laying back as Richard crawls to lay over him, his knee between Seigi's legs.

They should stop. They should talk about this. But Seigi reaches up to twine his fingers in Richard's hair, pulling him in for more kisses until Richard can barely hold himself up, feeling the warmth of Seigi's body beneath him.

"May I undress you?" he breathes against the skin of Seigi's neck, tugging at his collar with his fingers.

"Yes," Seigi says, tipping his head back for Richard to fumble with the buttons of his shirt, baring his chest for Richard to kiss. He tastes warm skin and maps the contours of Seigi's chest and stomach as though he already knows it, knowing where to touch to make Seigi arch up into his mouth or wriggle with ticklish delight. Seigi's shirt gets pulled off and thrown aside, and Richard decides he needs to go the same way, so he pulls it up over his head not even bothering to unfasten it. Buttons snag in his hair and Seigi reaches up to untangle them, careful and deft until Richard throws it away and presses himself to Seigi once more, and oh, the feel of so much of Seigi against his own skin soothes the burning want in his bones only for so long.

He rolls them sideways, cushioning Seigi's head with one arm as the other winds around Seigi's waist to caress the broad expanse of his back, skin that he's never seen before now but that he needs to touch, needs to learn. They kiss, returning over and over to the sweetness of lip upon lip, now doubly blessed by the heat of skin against skin, pulling each other close so tight that they could fuse into one, until Richard's searching hand drifts lower, low enough to graze Seigi's trousers.

"And these?" he asks between kisses. "May I?"

Seigi's hands mirror his, tugging at Richard's waistband.

"You too."

They separate just enough to unfasten their trousers, hastily shoving them aside before coming back together, only the thin fabric of their underwear separating them, kissing and stroking and holding until Richard can feel Seigi's want, hard against his hip, and he reaches down to press his palm flat, making Seigi cry out and squeeze his eyes closed, fingers tightening around Richard's arms as Richard plucks at the waistband of his underwear.

"May I?" he asks, one last time, and Seigi answers him with a kiss, needy sounds from his mouth as he pushes his hips upward against Richard's hand. Richard pulls, mindful of Seigi's sensitive flesh, shifting the fabric out of the way until he can take Seigi in hand, kissing away the desperate little noises he makes. Seigi is hot against his hand, and Richard touches him like he might touch himself, teasing and slow. In return, Seigi holds tight to his shoulders, mouth soft and open and eyes tight shut, making sounds that might be his name or might be pleas for more or might just be mindless nonsense as his body is overwhelmed by Richard's touch. Richard ignores the pulsing want between his own legs to slide down the bed, trailing hot kisses over Seigi's chest and stomach until he kneels between his legs, to get his mouth on Seigi, where he is hard and hot and weeping. Seigi bucks up involuntarily, almost choking him until he gets a hand on Seigi's hip to hold him steady. He kisses and sucks and works his hand over what he can't take in, tasting salt and skin and heat, while Seigi cries out and tangles his fingers in Richard's hair.



It isn't long before Seigi begins urgently prodding at Richard's shoulder, and Richard knows he ought to slow down, ought to take his time, but his senses are so entirely overwhelmed with *Seigi*, his tongue, his lips, his hands, all insistent on touching and tasting and drawing more of those wonderful keening sounds from Seigi's throat, and he keeps on going until Seigi bucks up off the bed, flooding his mouth with bitter heat. He holds on until Seigi shudders through the last of it, his hips dropping back on to the bed and his hands unclenching from Richard's shoulders to cover his face. Richard sits up and reaches for the bedside table, where there is thankfully a box of tissues already opened, and grabs one to spit into while Seigi isn't looking.

He sets the tissue aside and reaches one careful hand to brush Seigi's cheek, noting the dark flush of his skin and the sweat beading around his temples. Seigi lifts his hands and opens one eye, and Richard can't help leaning in to kiss his forehead, and then his cheek, his jaw, and his mouth. Although Seigi is drained from his release, he accepts the heat of Richard's mouth, not deterred by the taste of himself on Richard's tongue as their kisses grow fervoured once more. Seigi's hand sweeps tickling down Richard's ribs, over his hips, brushing, uncertain, against his erection.

"You too," he breathes against Richard's lips when Richard pushes up into his touch. Richard kisses him, groans something that might be a plea or an affirmation, his hands on Seigi's face, unable to keep himself from pressing into Seigi's hand. "Ah, show me?"

He looks down between them, and takes Seigi's hand in his own, curls Seigi's fingers around his length and guides him, makes Seigi's hand a tight channel to push himself into as he hooks a leg around Seigi's knee. It doesn't take much - it's been years, after all, years of sleeping alone and wanting and needing and never having, and all it takes is a twist of Seigi's hand and he's spilling over Seigi's warm skin, baring himself skin and sweat and longing so fragile and raw, lips wet throat aching back bowed to curl in towards Seigi who holds him through it, kisses his forehead and soothes his heated skin as he spills and spills and shakes shivering and new in Seigi's arms and, and, and-

"So long," he breathes, lips dragging against Seigi's throat, "I wanted, so long, you," and he finds Seigi's mouth and kisses his words into it, "need it, so long-"

Seigi's mouth is sweet and welcoming, his hands strong and careful over Richard's skin, soothing and petting until Richard settles his head on Seigi's shoulder. Seigi traces a fingertip around the edge of the ugly red splotches on Richard's chest, bloomed bright against his fair skin.

They lay a while, still pressed together, until the breeze from the open window sets them both shivering. Richard reaches to rearrange the sheets, until Seigi pushes awkwardly at his shoulder.

"I mean, I, uh, I need - ah, Richard - bathroom?"

Richard looks down at the mess between them. Feels the sudden urgent need to pee. Presses his face to Seigi's chest and groans.

"Go," he manages, pushing at Seigi until he climbs off the mattress with a laugh.

He listens to the water in the pipes as Seigi cleans up, then stands shivering by the door until he can swap places with him. He takes care of himself as quickly as he can, resisting the urge to inspect his face in the mirror. No doubt he looks a frightful mess, but he is cold and tired and his bed is so close.

Seigi has pulled back the sheets, and he slips into bed with a grateful sigh, pulling the blankets up over his shoulder. He knows they should sit a while, and talk. But they seem to gravitate toward one another, legs tangled and arms wrapped around waists and foreheads pressed together, sharing

heat and breath and slow, soft kisses. He knows they should talk. But he is tired, and isn't it practically morning in Tokyo? Besides, Seigi's mouth is warm, and his skin is soft, and Richard cannot find a single word in any language that could come close to expressing the way his heart is so tight and fluttery inside his chest, or the way his head is so fizzy with a million different thoughts. He presses his palm to Seigi's, and Seigi's fingers slip into the spaces between his, and it feels like it's where his hand is meant to be. Seigi's knee rests against Richard's inner thigh, and his hand is wide between Richard's shoulder-blades, and his forehead grazes Richard's each time they break between kisses, and isn't that enough? Can the talking wait just a little while longer, when his head is clear and his heart is beating steadily and he doesn't have so much of Seigi pressed against him?

He should sleep. Seigi still needs to rest, after the week he's had. The bed is comfortable, and the pillows are soft, and they should be able to fall asleep easily after their exertions.

But Seigi's mouth is warm, and his hands are keen and his skin is soft, and it takes a long time before they are spent enough to sleep.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for being patient in between updates, and also for all the lovely comments that have been left on this story. Sometimes it's a bit overwhelming to read them all, so please forgive me if I don't always reply - I do read them, and your kind words are what keep me going!

The bedroom light is still on when he wakes up, and he has no idea what time it is. He feels well-rested, and decides it must be morning, but something still feels off. Richard pulls the sheet down from over his face, and gets treated to the sight of Seigi smiling at him from his side of the bed.

He wants to wake up to that every morning for the rest of his life.

Richard opens his mouth to say good morning, but the memory of kissing Seigi on the balcony makes the words catch in his throat. God, he can remember tasting champagne on Seigi's tongue. The heat of his mouth. The heady scent between his legs. He feels his face flush just thinking about it.

"Last night," Seigi begins, his voice scratchy from sleep. His mouth opens and closes a couple of times, before his face colours and he ducks his head, hiding his face in the pillow.

"How do you feel about it today?" Richard asks. His chest feels tight as he braces himself for Seigi declaring it a huge mistake.

"I had no idea," Seigi says, turning his head just enough to reveal one eye, "that it could feel like that. I mean - when you - ah, when you" - He buries his face in the pillow again, but Richard thinks he hears a muffled laugh. "I'm sorry, I really don't know how to talk about it."

The memory of some long-forgotten teacher echoes in Richard's mind - *If you're not mature enough to talk about it, you're not mature enough to do it* - but he bites it back. This is no time for lecturing. Besides, Seigi is certainly mature enough to do it, and Richard isn't exactly doing a great job of talking about it.

"Do you regret it at all?" he manages to ask, his fingers clutching at the bed sheets. He is so braced for Seigi to tell him he wants Richard to give him some space alone, or to stay away from him altogether, that he almost doesn't register the determined shake of Seigi's head.

"When I woke up this morning and saw your face next to me, I, uh" - Seigi plucks at the corner of his pillow. "The first thing I thought was that I wanted to do that again. Is that - I mean, is it okay? If I want that?"

Richard opens his mouth to tell Seigi that it is very much okay to want that. But the words won't come. Instead, he reaches to press his palm to Seigi's cheek, his thumb brushing at the corner of Seigi's mouth. When Seigi doesn't flinch at the touch, Richard closes the space between them to press his lips to Seigi's. It's sleep-clumsy and badly aimed, but he feels Seigi press back, and they shift just enough for the seam of Richard's mouth to catch Seigi's lower lip. The bedclothes rustle as they pull each other closer, and Richard can feel the warmth of Seigi's chest against his, and

Seigi's knee nudges between his, and Seigi's feet bump against his ankles, and it's glorious, it's heavenly, it's-

"Ah, perhaps we should brush our teeth and wash up first?" Richard rubs his thumb at the corner of his mouth.

"Sorry!" Seigi hides his face in his pillow again. "Is my breath-"

"Both of us," Richard says, putting a hand to Seigi's arm in what he hopes is a reassuring way. "Alcohol before bed is - well, I'd rather forgotten what it's like."

Seigi lets him go first, and Richard can't help but linger over his reflection as he cleans his teeth. His hair is a tangled mess, his face a little blotchy, one ear still red from being pressed into his pillow. But his mouth twitches up at the corners, and he puts a hand to his shoulder where Seigi's hand had squeezed it the night before, while he was-

He ducks his head to spit toothpaste into the sink and feels laughter bubble up unexpectedly. He rinses his mouth, and ends up with his hand pressed to his lips to keep the sound from spilling out. The last thing he wants is for Seigi to hear him laughing to himself in the bathroom.

When they switch places, Richard puts a hand to Seigi's arm as they pass, letting it slide down past his elbow to catch his hand, just briefly, before he lets go so that Seigi can use the bathroom. Now that he's up, he doesn't feel like getting back into bed. His limbs feel twitchy, like he needs to be moving about, and with nowhere else to go in the bedroom, he crosses to the window. The main curtains are still open, but a sheer voile panel lets him look out without the worry of anyone seeing in.

From up here, the view is spectacular; a whole city where no one knows them. He remembers offering to take Seigi for a boat ride, and begins making a mental list of all the places they should see while they are here.

Then Seigi reappears from the bathroom, and suddenly he doesn't care about any of them.

Seigi hovers by the edge of the bed, looking like he wants to say something, his usual tendency to say whatever's on his mind clearly escaping him. Richard looks back towards the window for a second.

"It looks like it should be a clear day," he says. "A good day to see the city."

"If you want," Seigi says, his arms jerking like he's trying to fight the urge to cover his bare chest.

"Is there something you'd like to do today? We can do whatever you choose."

"I want to kiss you again." Seigi bites his lip. "Is that - is that okay?"

Richard is across the room in an instant, pulling Seigi into his arms like it's where he's meant to be. Seigi is so comfortingly warm against him, and Richard finds himself longing for the bed again, to wrap both of them in a cocoon of blankets so he can bask in that wonderful heat. Has he always been so cold until now? Kissing Seigi is like hot tea in winter, and Richard is parched, tasting Seigi's mouth like he can't get enough. Seigi lets himself be pulled back into bed, lets Richard press him into the mattress and cover his face with kisses. He finds the places that make Seigi cry out, the touches that turn his breath to sharp hisses and shuddering gasps. He kisses Seigi's arms, his ribs, his hip bones, all the way down to his knees, the bones of his ankles, the high arch of his foot. Then he finds his way to where Seigi is needy and wanting, using his hands and mouth to reduce Seigi to a sobbing desperate mess.

When Seigi begins pushing urgently at his shoulders, Richard shifts back up the bed, finding Seigi's mouth to kiss him again. He settles himself over Seigi, finding much-needed friction against Seigi's hip, pushing and pressing there like it's what his body was made for. Seigi pushes back, arching up off the mattress until he muffles a sudden cry by biting down on Richard's shoulder, spilling hot and messy over his own stomach.

Richard turns on his side to lay beside Seigi, one leg still hooked over his, and with his head resting against Seigi's shoulder. He is barely even conscious of his own want, still pulsing faintly between his thighs. Watching the rise and fall of Seigi's chest is far more captivating. He trails a fingertip over Seigi's skin, amazed that he is permitted even this much. Seigi covers his eyes with his forearm, and Richard watches as his mouth opens into a smile, and laughter spills out, seeming to surprise Seigi as much as it does Richard.

"How," Seigi begins, before another breathy laugh forces its way through, "how do you make me feel?"

"Feel what?"

"So - so good? Ah, there's no other word for it. Just good. Like everything is perfect when your hands are touching me?"

Richard finds Seigi's left hand and presses their palms together. The gold band is as warm as his skin, and Richard pulls that hand towards himself, kissing the knuckle just above it.

"I could ask the same of you."

Seigi's eyes go wide, then he tries to hide his face but ends up curling in towards Richard. So naturally Richard's arms wrap around him, holding him as he presses his face into Richard's neck.

"Really?" he asks, his voice muffled, and Richard tries not to flinch or giggle at the way his warm breath tickles at the sensitive skin of his throat. "You too?"

"Me too. Being able to hold you like this is - It's all I need right now. I don't need anything else."

When Seigi's arms tighten around him, when his fingers trail over Richard's skin, and he feels that he *knows* finally that Seigi wants this too, it's as though every muscle in his body wants to tense all at once, to curl himself around Seigi like spider legs and never let him go. Seigi's toes bump against his, their knees grazing as they settle in even closer together, and Richard tries to learn each separate sensation so he can recall it all when he is alone.

They lay a while, sharing long kisses, hands drifting until their touches become heated once more and they have to stop to catch their breath. Richard has little notion of how much time they spend this way, until he finds a ray of sunlight slipping through a gap in the curtain to dazzle him just so, and he turns to check the clock on the bedside table.

"We appear to have missed the hotel breakfast service," he says, and when Seigi laughs at the ridiculousness of it, he can't help but join in. Somehow they untangle themselves from the bedsheets and from each other, and he pushes Seigi towards the bathroom while he sits up to lean against the headboard, heedless of the way the sheets puddle in his lap.

When was he ever so carelessly nude around someone else? Not even with Deborah after their first few fumbles together, with hands under clothes in her dim little bedroom. He feels that old sting of guilt for thinking about her while Seigi is just a room away, washing off the evidence of their love-making. But he has no other comparison. Their nights together in the ancient bed in her student flat

had felt so illicitly thrilling, for all his nervous inexperience. But now he can barely remember the feel of her hand in his. Not with these new memories of Seigi's hands on his skin, Seigi's mouth on his, Seigi's body beneath him.

He listens to the sound of the shower, and wonders if it would be too much to go join Seigi in there.

They end up wandering the streets around the hotel until they find a café serving late breakfasts. It's too chilly to sit at one of the outdoor tables, so they sit squashed in at a small table indoors between some of the local regulars. Under the table, their knees and ankles bump together, and it's hard to get through their food without stopping to smile stupidly at one another.

With their bellies pleasantly full, they set out back into the city, intent on finding something to keep them occupied for a few hours. But somehow they end up back near the little collection of street food stalls they'd found the night before, and Richard hands Seigi a few Euros to buy another tray of loukoumades. They sit together on a bench where they can watch the sea, and Richard feels his limbs become comfortably loose as he sits, enough that he can turn to the side with a knee up to look at Seigi. When Seigi realises he is being watched, his face colours, but his smile suggests he doesn't mind.

"What?" he laughs, wiping a thumb along the edge of his mouth. "Did I get food on my face?"

"I enjoy seeing you smile," Richard tells him, thrilled that he can finally be so open about the feelings Seigi elicits in him. "It makes me happy to see you so relaxed and enjoying yourself."

"How can I not smile?" Seigi ducks his head for a moment, then turns to look at Richard. "I'm in Europe. I have three whole weeks of travel ahead of me, to see new places. And you. How can I not smile when you make me feel - I mean, last night, and this morning." He looks out at the ocean, chewing his lip, before turning back to Richard once more. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"You said, back in London that - that you had never had a male lover before."

It's not what he had been expecting Seigi to say, but he nods anyway.

"If that's true," Seigi continues, "then how did you know - I mean, you seemed to know what you were doing."

Oh.

Richard looks around to see if anyone else is within earshot. There's a family at the next bench a few metres away, but they don't seem aware at all of Richard and Seigi, and the chances that they understand Japanese are slim.

He takes Seigi's hand in his and turns it palm upward, tracing his fingertip around the gold band on Seigi's ring finger.

"Seigi, have you ever - ah, forgive me for being blunt, and feel free to decline to answer - have you ever, alone in your room, thought about making love to someone?"

Seigi's eyes go wide, before he gives a minute shake of his head.

"Not - not in any specific - I mean, not - not like that?"

“Not even-” He cannot bring himself to say her name. “Not even someone you had very special feelings for?” Seigi shakes his head. “Well, have you ever thought about how you might like to be touched, in such a situation?”

“Not really.”

Richard purses his lips, and makes a mental note to keep that particular revelation in mind in future.

“I suppose a positive aspect of making love to someone whose body is similarly built to oneself is that a person can consider how he might like to be touched, and then do the same for his partner.”

“So, you touch the other person how you’d want them to touch you?”

“To some extent, yes.”

“Does that mean you want me to do to you, what you did for me?”

This time it is Richard’s turn to look away, and he feels his cheeks heat up as he remembers the previous night.

“What I want,” he manages, when his brain has reconnected itself to his mouth, “is to please you.” He shifts on the bench and looks Seigi in the eye. “That is all I want - to please you. If it pleases you to reciprocate, then it most certainly pleases me.”

He watches Seigi’s face, still flushed, as he processes this. There are still a couple of little sweet dough-balls left in the cardboard tray, and he picks one out to eat. Then, at the last second, he changes his mind and offers it out to Seigi. Seigi looks at it, then up at him, so Richard lifts his hand higher, encouraging Seigi to take it. But Seigi leans in and takes a bite directly from his hand, his lip grazing Richard’s finger. Richard fights the urge to look around and make sure that no one has noticed them, and instead puts the other half of the dough into his mouth, licking the spiced sugar from his thumb.

They both look at the last one in the little cardboard tray. Seigi has mischief in his eyes as he picks it up and offers it to Richard, unsurprised when Richard mimics him, biting it in half before Seigi takes the last of it for himself.

“What would you like to do next?” Richard asks, his eyes fixed on Seigi’s fingers as he sucks the sugar and cinnamon from them. “A boat ride? A visit to the Acropolis?”

“We have two more days, right?”

“We do.”

“Can we do those tomorrow?”

“Then what shall we do today?”

They take a taxi for the short journey back to the hotel. Housekeeping have already been while they’ve been out, and Richard has the decency to feel a little guilty for messing up the clean sheets when they tumble back into bed together.

The rest of the afternoon is spent in bed, where they never let go of each other even when they fall asleep. Somehow, they rouse themselves enough to re-dress and go downstairs for dinner before heading straight back up to their room. Seigi stretches himself out on the stylish chaise in the open

living space, declaring that it would be a shame to have such a big space and not make use of all of it. So Richard kneels beside him and offers him chocolates from the box gifted to them along with the champagne and roses. For someone so inexperienced, Seigi reveals a natural, almost impish charm, keeping his eyes fixed on Richard's each time he accepts a chocolate from Richard's fingers.

Before long, Richard is sitting astride Seigi's legs, surprising himself with his own boldness as he kisses Seigi breathless. They don't even make it to the bedroom, simply unfastening enough buttons to get their hands on each other, stroking sharp and frantic until Seigi muffles a shout against Richard's shoulder. When he frets about making a mess of his shirt, Richard offers to buy him a dozen new ones, so Seigi tips him over on the chaise, kissing him all the while as he works his hand quick and eager until Richard makes a mess of his own clothing and they laugh and kiss their way to the bathroom to clean up.

They sleep through breakfast again, and only leave the bed when their stomachs are growling. Seigi picks a café for brunch and they fill up on wonderful food, all the while playing footsie under the table like teenagers, making eye-contact then looking back at their plates lest their gaze becomes too heated. When they leave, their hands reach for one another almost immediately, and Richard feels the warmth of Seigi's gold ring against his fingers.

He insists they make the trip to the Acropolis, so that Seigi has at least seen something of the city beyond their hotel room. With hands still entwined, they join a guided tour, trying to listen to the guide's words about the scenery, until Seigi complains in a whisper that he can't keep up with the accented English. They slip away, take a cab back to the hotel, and make a mess of the bed sheets all over again.

After their last night, they pack their suitcases and take a moment to stand on the balcony, looking out over the city in the late morning sun. Richard wraps his arms around Seigi, resting his chin on Seigi's shoulder, pressing their temples together as they both look out towards the ocean.

"I should bring you here in the summer," he says, pressing his hands to Seigi's chest, thrilled when Seigi covers them with his own and their wedding bands click against each other. "You should get to sit on the beach, in the sun, and have more than just a couple of days to relax." Richard hates sand, and would burn to a crisp in the Greek summer sun, but to see Seigi lazing on a white-sanded beach in nothing but shorts - oh, it would be worth it.

The short flight to Rome is almost a blessing after their last long-haul journey, and Seigi has barely nodded off, his head resting on Richard's shoulder, before Richard is shaking him awake as the plane comes in to land. In the taxi, Richard suggests things they could do in the city, and Seigi agrees to all of them, but doesn't object when Richard keeps him in bed for the first day of their stay.

When they venture out to Fontana di Trevi on their second day, there is a definite chill in the air, and they stay just long enough to throw two coins apiece into the fountain before finding somewhere for lunch. The table is small enough that their knees brush when they sit down, and they barely make it through one course before Richard asks for the bill, practically dragging Seigi out by the hand to flag down a taxi to go back to the hotel.

They do not visit the Forum, or the Colosseum, or even a single piazza. Instead, they keep their hotel room warm, barely leaving the bed except to eat or wash up. They kiss, make love, sleep, in cycles that make Richard lose any sense of how much time is passing. If Seigi's hands are not touching him, he feels lost, disconnected, and Seigi reaches out for him any time he slips more than



a few inches away.

When the time comes to check out of the hotel and head to the train station for the next leg of their trip, they agree that they really should make time to see more than just the inside of their hotel room. Seigi asks if they can take a gondola trip in Venice to make up for the missed boat ride in Athens. So after checking in to their hotel, they find a gondolier prepared to work through the November chill, and cuddle together under a blanket as they drift along the canal.

“I should bring you here in the summer,” he tells Seigi, his lips brushing against Seigi’s temple.

“You said that about Athens,” Seigi reminds him with a laugh. Richard huffs and turns his face up to the weak sun, tightening his arms around Seigi’s middle.

“I mean it. I want to see you smiling in the sunshine.”

“If we come back here in the summer, it might be too hot. We wouldn’t be able to do this.” He tugs the blanket up higher, and holds Richard closer. “If the summers are anything like Tokyo, we’d be too sweaty to even hold hands.”

“That’s what showers are for.”

He doesn’t bother to stifle his laughter as Seigi hides his flushed face under the blanket.

It rains for the entirety of their stay in Berlin. They barely even attempt to leave the hotel room, except for to take a walk around the Christmas market, sharing an umbrella and trying gluhwein and stollen, buying souvenirs for Hiromi and Saul, before taking the U-bahn back to the hotel to make love as the rain lashes against the window.

“Do you want to come here in the summer?” Seigi asks when they push the covers aside for some air. His hair is beautifully askew, and Richard tugs at it fondly.

“No,” he says, trailing a fingertip along Seigi’s jaw, down his neck to his clavicle. “This is perfect.”

In Barcelona, they buy postcards, and he helps Seigi to write a message in English to Henry. Richard dashes off a quick note to Deborah on the back of a photograph of the Sagrada Familia, even though they never get around to seeing it, telling her, *‘Lots to catch up on, talk when I’m back in Tokyo?’* and drops the card in a postbox along with Seigi’s postcards to Henry and Hiromi before running back to the hotel to escape another sudden rain-shower.

He is drenched when he gets back, his shirt soaked through and his hair a mess. Seigi sits behind him on the couch in their suite and dries it with one of the thick hotel towels before combing out the tangles with his fingers. Before long, Richard’s eyes have slipped closed, Seigi’s fingertips almost hypnotising as they stroke against his scalp.

“Don’t stop,” he hears himself say, when Seigi’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder.

“I thought you’d fallen asleep.”

“I could.” He remembers styling Seigi’s hair for him on the morning of the wedding, and wonders if Seigi might have felt then what he feels now: this tentative serenity, this temptation to sink back

against Seigi's chest and let Seigi hold him until he is entirely unravelled, heedless of his damp hair or the way his skin is blotched from the cold. Seigi has seen him all a-tangle and still has the patience to work through his knots, and Richard has no choice but to love him.

The last leg of their trip takes them to Paris, and although Richard is determined that Seigi should see as many of the sights as possible, he is keenly aware that they only have a handful of days left to spend in this blissful idleness. As they tour the Louvre and climb the tower and stroll along the Champs-Élysées, Richard tries not to think about how they could be back in the privacy of their hotel room, making love, or just sleeping in each other's arms. They have barely more than a handful of hours together before they are supposed to take the ferry to Dover and the train up to Cambridge, to end their tour back at Claremont Hall with his family, and Richard makes no secret of his selfishness when it comes to Seigi.

On their last night in Paris, as their suitcases sit packed and ready by the door, Richard spends hours exploring Seigi's body, covering every inch of his skin with kisses, bringing him to the peak of pleasure again and again until he is practically sobbing. He reaches for Richard, holding him so tight it's almost painful, and Richard kisses away the tears that slip from his eyes as he whispers in the darkness, "I wish we could stay like this forever, I don't want this to end."

Richard finds his hand, brings it to his lips, kisses the gold band on Seigi's finger. He wants to say the same, to tell Seigi that he wants to hold him like this until the world ends, but his voice catches in his throat, the feeling too enormous to squeeze into mere words.

"I'll always remember this," Seigi says, his face pressed into Richard's neck, his voice tremulous as Richard links their fingers together. "No matter what happens from now on, after we leave tomorrow - this, this will be my most perfect memory."

Richard doesn't want to think about it - about returning to Japan, and how they will deal with the practicalities of their new relationship - about returning to his family and suddenly not having to pretend. It can wait until the morning, after check-out, after the ferry ride. Right now, Seigi is in his arms, so beautiful he could weep, and the rest of the world will have to wait.

"I wish this didn't have to end," Seigi says again, and kisses him like it just might.

## Chapter 12

There is a car waiting for them outside the train station at Cambridge. For once, Richard doesn't object to his family's extravagance, as it allows him to sit much closer to Seigi than would be appropriate in the back seat of a taxi.

Seigi is quiet during the short drive; has been so since they left Paris that morning, keeping hold of Richard's hand for as long as possible and squeezing it every time Richard gives him a concerned glance. When the car comes to a stop by the front steps of the house, Seigi offers a hand to help him out of the back seat, and they wait together as the driver takes their suitcases up the steps for the house staff to deal with. Seigi's hand finds his almost instinctively, and Richard realises that such opportunities will be rare when they return to Japan.

"No pretense this time," he says as they walk up the steps together. He wonders if his family will notice the change in their relationship, and become suspicious. The thought of his family seeing him happy is surprisingly unsettling; he has been angry with them for so long that it is almost impossible to imagine being any other way around them.

Henry and Anna Marie are waiting to greet them, and Richard accepts a hug from both of them. He is pleasantly surprised when they greet Seigi in the same way, and Seigi accepts their fussing with good grace.

Over a late lunch, Henry pushes for details of their trip, and Richard tries to bluff the details of the sights they never saw.

"What about Barcelona?" Henry asks, ignoring the food on his plate. "I haven't been there since I was a teenager. I'd love to go again."

"Henry, darling, they were on their honeymoon," Anna Marie chides, giving Richard a knowing look. "I doubt they saw anything other than the inside of their hotel room." She arches an eyebrow and gives Richard a crooked smile, one that Jeffrey has clearly inherited from her. "How was Venice?"

Richard doesn't look up from his plate. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Henry looking equally mortified.

"I enjoyed the gondola ride," Seigi tells her, evidently not picking up on her inference despite his impressive understanding of English. Anna Marie's eyes widen in that infuriating way that implies she still forgets Seigi knows what she's saying, before she slips back into a smile.

"Oh, I'm so glad you had a good time, dear. Really, the two of you seem so much more relaxed, and so happy together. I told you, didn't I, that newlyweds really need that time to be together without worrying about the rest of the world."

At that, Richard can't help but look at Seigi, who returns his smile. Under the table, their knees bump together, and Richard is certain his face is red; he has no idea how to deal with his family seeing him so happy.

That night in his old bedroom, he pulls Seigi close to him. Seigi is still warm from his bath, his hair fluffed up against the pillow, and Richard kisses him with all the want that has been building since they left their hotel room that morning.

"Here, in your childhood bedroom?" Seigi asks in a breathy whisper, as Richard kisses his neck

and fumbles with the buttons of his pyjamas. "Your family are just down the hall."

"I would like to make some happy memories here, before we go back."

Seigi pulls him closer and kisses him, and then disappears under the blankets. Richard has to cover his face with a pillow to muffle his cries.

They have a day and a half to spend at Claremont Hall before their flight to Tokyo, and Richard finds himself following Henry around the house and grounds, listening to his plans for opening up sections of the estate to the public.

"All this art just sitting in dark rooms, hidden away from the world," Henry laments as they sit in the drawing room with tea and cake. "We barely even notice it - it's practically just wallpaper at this point. We should loan out collections. Or even allow visitors in to view it here. And the gardens! Ricky, I had the most wonderful idea to offer apprenticeships with the groundskeepers or the gardeners. Wouldn't it be splendid to have young people around the place?"

The change in Henry is remarkable, so much that the gaunt figure who pleaded for Seigi's help just two months ago could be an entirely different person. Richard remembers the quiet, studious boy he and Jeffrey used to envy back when they had no concept of the pressure Henry was under as the heir to the estate. By the time he'd been old enough to truly understand Henry's role in the family, he had already run away to the other side of the world, giving little thought to what his eldest cousin was doing while he was selling gems to people with more money than sense.

Seeing him now, Richard acknowledges a smidgen of guilt over having missed out on the past few years with Henry. It had been easy to include him in his anger, for being Jeffrey's excuse for interfering with his relationship with Deborah, and for not making any attempts at reconciliation in the aftermath. But now, as Henry talks about his plans for the estate he will one day be responsible for, Richard finds himself beginning to see just how much pressure his eldest cousin has been under almost since the day he was born. He is responsible for the livelihoods of every member of staff employed by the Claremonts, as well as the building itself and the acres of land surrounding it. Richard does not envy him for it.

Jeffrey breezes in late in the afternoon, mobile phone pressed to his ear and a small wheeled suitcase trailing behind him. He leans against the open doorway of the drawing room, giving them a wave as he talks to someone, rolling his eyes at their answer and pantomiming to them about how dull he finds the conversation. When he ends the call with a hearty "Ciao!" Richard wants to make him eat the damn phone. He can only assume that the jet-setter act is for Seigi's benefit.

"How wonderful to see all my brothers together again," he says, taking a seat beside Henry. "Ricky, I won't probe you for details of your honeymoon. I'm sure mother's already embarrassed you terribly over it."

The whole family sits together for dinner that evening, with all three Claremont boys suffering together as Godfrey and Anna Marie reminisce over their own honeymoon and the early years of their marriage. Richard feels a familiar pang of emptiness at the thought that he never got to hear such stories from his own parents, but shakes it off, resolving to make sure that he and Seigi have nothing but happy memories together when they are old enough to reminisce like this.

After dinner that night, Henry suggests that they adjourn to the music room. Richard perches on the arm of Seigi's chair as they listen to Henry at the piano. As he loses himself in the music, Richard finds himself relaxing further against the back of the chair, resting an arm around Seigi's shoulders. He is so relaxed, in fact, that it is only when Henry stops playing that he realises Jeffrey has been watching the two of them with a strange smile on his face.

When Henry has excused himself to get ready for bed, Jeffrey motions for the two of them to stay a little longer.

“I know you think me insincere, Ricky,” he says, leaning his elbows on his knees in an uncharacteristic show of seriousness, “but I mean it when I say the two of you look genuinely happy together. You should treasure that. It’s not something that comes easily for people like us - ah, people from families such as ours, you know. Those of us in a position that might seem enviable to people on the outside, but who are often surrounded by insincere flatterers and frauds. Out of the three of us, Ricky, you were always the most likely to find true happiness, and now that you have, you should hold on to it.” He leans back in his seat and runs a hand through his hair. “I’ll be honest, there were moments before the wedding when I had my doubts - when I wondered if I ought to prepare for arranging a quiet separation once the inheritance was dealt with, but I can see now that I needn’t have worried.”

He gets to his feet, and on his way out of the room, he puts a hand on Richard’s shoulder.

“You found your happiness, Ricky, Hold on to it.”

They linger a while in the music room after Jeffrey leaves them alone. Richard shifts until he’s practically sitting in Seigi’s lap, and they share a few soft kisses until the sound of the clock chiming eleven disturbs their peace, and they agree to head upstairs to bed.

It’s cold in Richard’s bedroom, the old fireplace having long been sealed off and replaced with an electric radiator that isn’t nearly as effective. They change quickly, and Richard slips into bed to warm his feet while Seigi goes to take a shower. He looks at their suitcases and carry-on luggage, sitting neatly side-by-side near the door, and can’t help but think about what things will be like when they return to Tokyo.

For a short while, he indulges in a cosy fantasy of home-cooked meals every evening, of lunch dates in the city and onsen mini-breaks - he stops himself from fully picturing a house with a garden and a dog or two, but the thought of waking up to Seigi every day in a bed of their own is enough to warm him right down to his toes.

He is so lost in his daydream that he misses the sound of the bedroom door opening, and is quite startled when Seigi approaches the bed. Richard sits up against the headboard and pulls back the covers on Seigi’s side of the bed for Seigi to climb in beside him.

“I’ve been thinking about what Jeffrey said,” Seigi begins as he pulls the blankets up over his lap. “About arranging a quiet separation.”

Even though Richard is sitting down, he feels so suddenly unsteady, as though the bed is suspended from the ceiling instead of standing firmly on the floor.

“A separation?”

“I know the wait period is usually two years, but I did some research while we were staying in Kensington, and you can request a separation earlier than that, if one partner has behaved unreasonably.” He says this so matter-of-factly, as though he is simply talking about his college schedule or Richard’s appointment calendar. “I don’t mind if you want to name me as the one to blame for the separation.”

Richard runs Seigi’s words over in his mind, trying to work out if he has missed some part of the conversation, or some nuance that would make Seigi’s words make sense.

“You want me to blame you for our separation?”

“Well, of course. I’d never expect you to take the blame. You would stand to lose a lot more than I would.”

Richard takes a long, slow breath, but it does nothing to steady the sudden unease that prickles under his skin.

“Seigi, after - after these last three weeks, after what has happened between us - are you actually telling me that you want a separation?”

“That was always the plan, right?” He turns his head just enough to offer a weak smile.

“The plan?”

“Right. We would have the civil partnership, sort out the inheritance, then arrange a separation after some time had passed, and then you would be free. The diamond being a sapphire, and the holiday, I know they weren’t originally a part of the plan, but we said we would go along with the trip for your family’s sake.”

Richard finds himself looking down at his hands, where they rest on top of the blankets. It occurs to him, as he studies the cuffs of his pyjamas, that he is entirely underdressed for this conversation. One should not end a relationship dressed in pyjamas.

The ridiculousness of the thought causes an unexpected nervous laughter to bubble up from his throat, and he has to bite a knuckle to keep it from spilling out. Seigi doesn’t notice anything amiss, and Richard only knows this isn’t some horrible dream from the sting of his bitten skin.

“Seigi, am I to understand that, in spite of everything that has passed between us during our *holiday*, you have always intended to move for a separation?” Seigi nods, and nothing in his face suggests that he sees what Richard is getting at. “You didn’t think that our- our intimacy might change anything?”

Seigi looks down at his hands, and twists the gold and platinum band on his finger.

“The past three weeks were - I mean, I never anticipated anything like that happening for me, and it was truly an amazing time. But we always knew this arrangement was going to be temporary.” He shrugs, and looks up at the ceiling for a moment. “It was never going to last forever. Someone like me, with someone like you? It’s not meant to be. It’s not-” He breaks off, and bites his lip, before trying again for a smile. “We don’t have to do it right away. But whenever you choose, whenever you think the time is best, I’ll sign whatever papers need signing, and say I was the one who behaved unreasonably. Then you’ll be free. You can call her. Deborah, wasn’t it? I’m sure she’ll be happy to hear that you’re free again.”

He sits there, in the same bed where Seigi brought him to earth-trembling pleasure less than twenty-four hours ago, and realises that his daydreams are all for nought.

“Is that what you want?”

“It’s what we were always going to do.”

When Richard is unable to say anything in response, Seigi slides down under the covers and settles his head on the pillow, looking up at the ceiling.

“I’ll never forget these past few weeks,” he says, as he closes his eyes and turns his head away.

“I’ll always have those happy memories to look back on. But separating is for the best, don’t you think?”

*No*, Richard wants to yell, *separating is going to kill me, how do you expect me to go on alone after everything we’ve shared?* But the words won’t come out. He feels stuck, unable to move or speak or even cry, as Seigi settles in to sleep next to him while Richard feels his heart break all over again.

In that infuriating way of his, Seigi is asleep within minutes, his mouth open a little as his face softens and his breathing evens out. Richard sits there and watches the bedclothes as they shift minutely with each breath Seigi takes, and tries to understand. He replays that first night in Athens, when he kissed Seigi, when he took Seigi to bed - did Seigi not want that? Had he pressured Seigi in some way? They had finished a bottle of champagne between them and neither could have made any claims to sobriety or rational thought. But Seigi had said, the morning after, that he’d wanted to kiss Richard again.

Has it only ever been a holiday for Seigi, then, he wonders. A brief flirtation with romance in a place where no one knew him and there were no consequences? Was it all just an opportunity to try something new, before returning to reality?

He sits until his eyes grow tired, but even after turning off the bedside lamp and laying his head on the pillow, sleep does not come. He lays there, inches away from Seigi, and remembers the first night they’d shared this same bed, when he had no knowledge of how it felt to hold Seigi in his arms and when he had tried not to let his feelings show.

He has no idea what time it is when he eventually falls asleep, but when he wakes, there is sunlight spilling through the gaps in the curtains. He turns over, and when he finds Seigi’s side of the bed empty, he tries to tell himself that Seigi is probably just in the bathroom, or perhaps he has slipped downstairs to make tea the way Richard likes before they have to endure their long-haul flight back to Japan.

But when he climbs out of bed and crosses the room, he finds his suitcase sitting alone by the door, its matching mate already gone. There is only one pair of shoes, only one carry-on bag. Nothing of Seigi’s remains in his room.

He is halfway down the staircase before he remembers that he is still in pyjamas, and halfway to the dining room when he decides he doesn’t care. Jeffrey is the only one still in there, a half-eaten croissant in his hand as he works at his laptop with the other hand. He gives Richard a lopsided grin and raises his croissant-hand in greeting.

“I see Nakata-kun hasn’t made a morning person of you yet, Ricky.”

“Where is he?” Richard resists the urge to throw a coffee cup at his cousin.

“Nakata-kun? Probably at the airport by now.”

“What?”

Jeffrey puts his croissant down and brushes crumbs from his fingers, his face slipping into a frown.

“He said he told you. Got a message from his mother, and had to head back on an earlier flight. Said you were following him on the flight you’d already booked, to save you both buying another ticket. God, Ricky, you really are still useless in the mornings, if you can’t even remember an entire conversation with your husband.”

Richard straightens his pyjamas, and smooths down his hair. He thinks about Seigi sitting on a plane, making the long journey back to Japan by himself, and wonders whether he feels lonely, or whether he is glad to be away from Richard.

“Of course. I remember now. I must have been not quite awake - it was rather early when he left.”

He turns away, then puts a hand on the door frame and looks back at Jeffrey.

“Was he okay? When he left.”

“He seemed alright. Mother sent him off with one of the drivers and a tupperware box of pastries for the trip. What’s the issue with his mother? He didn’t say - I hope it’s nothing too serious.”

“No,” Richard says, although he has no idea. “Just - his belongings are currently at her house. There was some issue with storage, or moving.”

Jeffrey gives him that familiar crooked smile.

“I’ll bet you’re looking forward to house-hunting with him. Setting up a little place together. We don’t have an office in Tokyo, but I’m sure I can put you in touch with a good estate agent, if you like.”

Richard bites down the habitual urge to tell Jeffrey where to shove his offer, and somehow musters up a smile.

“I’ll let you know,” he says, hearing the words as though someone else is speaking. “That could be helpful. Thank you.”

“Ricky, I’ll deny it if you ever tell anyone I said this, but - but I think I might be just the tiniest bit jealous of you. Not the marriage bit, but. But how he looks at you? And how you - No, I can’t bring myself to say it. Just - go, and be happy. Be sickeningly happy, Ricky, because you deserve it. It looks good on you.”

He turns his attention back to his laptop, and Richard heads back up to his bedroom.

He sits through lunch with his aunt and uncle, making up lies about the things he plans to do when he catches up with Seigi in Tokyo. Shows them a picture of the building where Jewellery Étranger is located and agrees with them that they should visit when their schedules allow.

A driver takes him to Heathrow that afternoon, and Richard considers asking if he also drove Seigi that morning. Instead, he sits silently in the back seat, watching the scenery as the fields and stone walls give way to yellow-brick suburbs, and eventually to London itself.

He passes through airport security without any hassle, and if the staff stare at him too long or linger over the name on his passport, he doesn’t notice it. He browses the shops and drinks bottled water in the first class lounge until it is time to board the plane, and watches out of the window during take-off without ever truly noticing the lights outside. It’s early evening when he leaves Heathrow, and December-dark out, and the plane chases the sun towards Tokyo.

There is no change-over with British Airways, and he manages to catch a few hours of restless sleep during the flight, although he feels not the least bit refreshed when they touch down in Tokyo. He goes through the airport routine in a daze, desperate for a good cup of tea and a hot meal. It is only when he arrives at the taxi rank that he realises he does not know where he is



supposed to go.

He has no home in Tokyo. His shop is, presumably, still being sub-let. He has not contacted Saul to confirm his return. He is, once again, adrift.

Richard takes a taxi to Ginza out of habit, and finds one of his preferred hotels. He eats dinner, and returns to his room, sitting on the bed with his jacket still in his hands, and wonders what he is supposed to do next.

## Chapter 13

On his third day back in Tokyo, Richard re-opens Jewellery Étranger,

Saul meets him at the shop, promptly at nine in the morning, and pointedly does not comment on the shadows under Richard's eyes, or the way he fumbles to get the key in the lock. He says very little as he goes around inspecting the shop's interior, opening windows to let in the brisk December air before heading to the kitchen to make tea. He prepares two cups of royal milk tea, an attempt at sympathy, before asking what has clearly been on his mind for a while.

"And where is your husband this morning?" He looks at Richard over his cup.

"At his mother's house."

"Do you know this for a fact, or is that simply your best guess?"

"It's logically the only place he could be, since he no longer keeps an apartment in Takadanobana."

"So he has not been staying with you since you returned to Tokyo." Richard gives Saul a scowl instead of an answer. "Well, what else am I supposed to assume? A week ago you were in high enough spirits to send me a postcard, and yet when I spoke to you yesterday you sounded as empty as a poor man's pocket. And now, when you are finally back in your shop, with all your family problems wrapped up neatly, you look as though you would rather be anywhere else but here. So either something has happened to sow discord between you and Nakata-kun, or you think I have made some grave mistake with your tea. And I know my tea-making skills are impeccable."

"I don't want to talk about it." Richard fusses with his cup and saucer. The tea is truly decent, perhaps not quite as sweet as he might like, but Saul cannot be faulted for it. Perhaps later, he will acknowledge Saul's knack for getting him to recognise the childishness of his behaviour, but right now he only wants to wallow in his own personal well of loneliness. His story seems destined to begin and end with heartbreak, and he is not yet ready to pretend everything is okay.

"Well, you are your own man, and I cannot force you to talk. I trust, however, that you can raise a smile for your customers when they arrive. After everything I have done to ensure you had a shop to return to, it would be a shame if you were to put your customers off with such a sour expression. Whatever you have done to make him keep his distance, it is yours to address on your own time."

"You're so certain that I would be the one at fault? That Seigi could never do something to cause me distress?" He realises, too late, that Saul is baiting him. But his anger has been simmering, unvented, for too long, and the pressure is becoming more than he can stand.

"That boy is so head over heels for you he probably couldn't live with himself if he offended you."

"Then why did he say there was no future for us?"

It comes out much louder than he'd intended, and causes Saul to lean back a little in his seat, his eyes widening briefly before he shakes his head.

"So you intend to pick up your life here and not see or speak to him again?" Saul tugs at the tip of his moustache. "Hmm. Perhaps he is right, then. That boy followed you halfway around the world, but you are not willing to pick up the phone to talk this out with him. Perhaps the two of you are not suited for each other after all. A shame. I liked him."

Saul gets up and takes his cup and saucer into the kitchen, leaving Richard alone to sip his tea. Of course he knows, rationally, that Saul has a point, and that it would be childish of him to simply not make an attempt to reach out to Seigi. But the thought of talking to him again reminds Richard of his family's attempts to talk to him after Deborah left; he does not know how to be comfortable around Seigi anymore.

The doorbell rings just as he finishes the last of his tea. It's a little early for customers - the shop is not due to open for another fifteen minutes - but an eager walk-in will at least allow him to drop the subject with Saul for a while. He sets his teacup down on the low table and goes to the intercom, making a quick last-minute check of his suit before checking to see who is at the door.

"Seigi?"

Seigi looks into the camera and gives a hesitant wave, and when he speaks, his voice is tinny over the intercom.

"Ah, good morning, Richard."

He stands there with his finger on the button, trying to think of something to say.

"For goodness' sake, let the boy in." Saul bustles back into the room to collect his empty cup and saucer, scowling at Richard before he takes it away to the kitchen. Richard opens up the door, but Seigi lingers by the doorstep, not quite meeting Richard's eye.

"Are you here to collect your white sapphire?" Richard asks him. He hates the way his voice sounds: tight, pinched, as though there is a hand around his throat. Seigi looks confused, and shakes his head.

"I saw the re-opening notice on the shop's website, and I thought you might be busy with customers. Ah, I picked up some sweets on my way in, since I didn't know if you'd have the kitchen stocked." Seigi holds up a paper bag, and Richard tries not to be distracted by the beautiful boxes of macarons and cookies inside it. He notices, then, that Seigi's hand is bare, the gold-and-platinum band no longer on his finger. Richard puts his own left hand into his pocket, and feels for his own ring. He took it off when he boarded the plane at Heathrow, but it has been in his pocket each day since.

"You came here to work?"

"Well, it's Saturday, and you did say that once we were back I could continue working for you until I re-enroll in the spring."

"You came here to work."

"Was I not supposed to?" Seigi moves past him and sets the bag of sweets down on the low table, hovering by the red chairs. "You did say that I could continue working here when you returned and re-opened the shop."

Richard cannot think of any reply that won't make him sound unreasonable. He did, after all, tell Seigi he could come back to work at the shop. And Seigi has travelled all the way from his mother's home, and gone to the trouble of picking up sweets to restock the kitchen.

Saul reappears, and gives Seigi a smile.

"Nakata-kun, good morning. You are here to work, yes?" Seigi nods, and gives him an awkward wave. "Excellent. A reliable worker who turns up when he is supposed to is exactly what this shop

needs. Why don't you put your shopping away in the kitchen?"

Seigi does as he is told, not even stopping to take off his coat, leaving Richard with Saul.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth open like a codfish," Saul tells him, when Richard watches Seigi go. "No doubt you are going to have a busy day with lots of eager customers, since word of your return has apparently spread."

Sure enough, the doorbell rings again, and Richard finds himself greeting an eager customer who insisted he simply couldn't wait outside any longer and had to speak to Richard about purchasing stones for his jewellery design business. Richard thanks him for coming and leads him to a seat, glaring daggers at Saul as soon as the customer's back is turned. Saul only smiles, before disappearing to the kitchen. After just a few minutes, Seigi appears with two cups of hot tea and a selection of snacks on a tray, and he sets them down with practised ease, greeting the customer only briefly before heading back to the kitchen again.

When the customer leaves, Richard goes to the kitchen to find Seigi cleaning the inside of a cupboard with a cloth, complaining to Saul about how the sub-letter clearly didn't use the kitchen much. Before Richard can interrupt their conversation, the doorbell rings again; Saul shoos him back into the shop, shutting himself away in the office, leaving Richard with no choice but to greet his next customer.

The day proves to be exceptional for business; in between walk-ins, Richard takes telephone calls requesting appointments or hears from Saul about appointments booked online. A little after midday, Seigi offers to go out to buy lunch for everyone, and returns with a selection of sandwiches, but takes his to the kitchen, insisting that he doesn't want to be in the way of Richard's almost non-stop stream of visitors.

Things start to slow down a little as the clock nears four, and when Seigi comes to clear yet another load of cups and plates from the shop's main room, Saul comes out of the office with his coat draped over his arm and a briefcase in his hand.

"Well, it's about time I was off," he announces, and it's only because Richard has known him so long that he can spot the uncertainty at the edge of Saul's smile. "I am returning to Sri Lanka in the morning, and I have some things to take care of before I leave. Souvenirs, packing - I'm sure you both understand, given how well travelled you have both become. Now, I trust that I can finally hand this shop back over to you, Richard, and the next time I hear from you, it had better be in the form of a Christmas card and a positive quarterly finance report."

"Understood." He sees Saul to the door, trying to ignore the stern look on his face until it softens at the last second.

"At least try talking to the boy," Saul says, his voice hushed. "This awkward avoidance is foolish." He waves at them both before heading down the steps to the street. When Richard turns away from the closed door, Seigi has disappeared back to the kitchen once more.

Richard finds him with his sleeves rolled up, wiping the countertops. The kitchen smells strongly of disinfectant, and Seigi's hair is askew at the front, as though he has brushed it back off his face more than once. Richard's heart feels somehow both full at the familiarity of seeing Seigi at work, and fragile with the knowledge that he can no longer take Seigi in his arms, the way he might have done just a week ago.

"Thank you for your hard work today," he hears himself say. Seigi's mouth curves into a smile, although he doesn't look up. For a moment, Richard wonders if this is it; if they'll simply go back

to employer and employee, only seeing each other on the weekends. But he knows, even if they don't talk today, that sooner or later one of them will end up revealing something personal, or owing the other a favour, or confuse a customer about the nature of their relationship, and Richard will have no choice but to fall in love with Seigi all over again.

"It's good to be back." He realises that Seigi is speaking and has to think hard to take in the words. "And it was good to see Saul, and to talk with him while you were seeing customers. Whoever was sub-letting the shop didn't do a great job of keeping things clean, though. I mean, it was tidy, but not *clean*, you know? I cleaned out all the cupboards, and inside the fridge, and on top of the fridge because that was really dusty, and then"-

"You said you would make pudding."

"Huh?"

Seigi turns to look at him, finally, the cloth hanging limp in his hand. Richard realises what he has just said, and tries to reverse his train of thought until he can find what caused him to blurt that out.

"On the day of our we- partnership, after the ceremony itself. You said you would make pudding, when you were back in the shop." He opens the fridge, and although it is very neatly ordered inside, and well-stocked with milk and a few sweets, there is no sign of any home-made pudding.

"I did, didn't I? I'm sorry - I can make some, although I don't know if it would be ready to eat today. It might have to sit in the fridge until tomorrow."

"I realised, just now, that I haven't eaten any for over a month." He feels his mouth twitch up at one corner. "I barely even thought about it, then suddenly, this afternoon, I had a craving for it."

"I'll make some. It's no trouble."

"Seigi?" He meets Seigi's eye, just for a moment, before it becomes too uncomfortable and he has to look at the spotless worktop behind him. "That night, in Athens."

Immediately, Seigi's gaze lowers, and he begins to worry at the cloth in his hands.

"Ah, yeah." His mouth twitches, but with his head tipped down, it's hard to tell whether it's a smile or a grimace.

"Did you - or perhaps, no, did I-" Richard shakes his head, and tries again. "Did I pressure you, in any way?"

That makes Seigi look up, finally, and when he does, his forehead is creased in confusion.

"Pressure? No, no I never - I mean, maybe I was a little surprised, at first? But no, you didn't - Richard, you asked, each time, 'Is this okay?' I remember. I remember how you always asked." Seigi smiles, just for a second. "As if I could ever say no."

"That is precisely what I mean. That perhaps, because of our prior relationship, that you felt that saying 'no' might offend me, or that you might find yourself alone in a strange place if I walked away."

Seigi shakes his head.

"That never occurred to me."

“Then why-” Richard bites his lip, and fights the urge to turn and walk out of the kitchen, away from this conversation. “Those three weeks. What did they mean to you, then? Do they mean anything to you now?”

Seigi puts down the cloth and rubs a hand over the back of his head. His face is a little flushed, and Richard almost regrets asking him outright.

“I’ll always cherish my memories of those three weeks. I was truly sad when we had to leave Paris, when the trip came to an end.”

Richard feels his whole body sag, his shoulder coming to rest against the kitchen doorframe.

“So you never intended for what passed between us to be any more than temporary?”

He watches Seigi’s face cloud over, his expression unreadable, before he turns away and picks up the discarded cloth, taking it to the sink and rinsing it out under the tap.

“Have you spoken to her, since you got back? Uh, Deborah? That’s her name, right?”

As this rollercoaster of a conversation takes a lurching twist, Richard feels his stomach drop, his head almost seeming to spin.

“Why do you bring her up now?”

“You exchanged messages with her, on the day of the ceremony. I saw your phone screen light up when a message came in - I didn’t read it, but I remember seeing her name. I mean, you can tell her that you’re free from the inheritance now.”

“She already knows.”

Standing with his back to Richard, Seigi’s face is hidden, but his shoulders drop a little when Richard says that.

“So you’ll be able to tell her that you can see her again.”

“Is that what this is all about?”

“It’s what it was always about, wasn’t it?” Seigi starts wiping around the sink, even though it’s probably spotless already. “Your family came between the two of you because of the inheritance, but now that’s all squared away, so you’re free to see her again.”

“Is that what you think?”

“You were exchanging messages with her on the day of our we- the day of the ceremony. You sent her a postcard while we were on our fake honeymoon. So I know you still think about her. And now you’re free to see her again. Or at least, once we arrange a formal separation.”

Richard puts a hand to his face, hiding a long exhale as he tries to imagine Seigi’s perspective of the whole thing. Of course it would look like that if he saw a message from Deborah on the morning of their wedding. But something still bites at his thoughts, making the memory of those nights with Seigi sting at the edges.

“So you truly always meant for what passed between us to be nothing more than temporary.” He looks down, at the tiles of the kitchen floor. Seigi was right about the place not having been thoroughly cleaned; he presumes that the only reason Seigi hasn’t mopped is because he’s been

using the kitchen for other things all day.

“I kept telling myself that it would end, once you were back here and ready to see De-” Seigi’s voice hitches, and Richard finds himself fighting the urge to reach for his hand. “See her again. Those three weeks - I’ll always treasure those memories, but I never wanted to let myself get carried away into believing it would last much longer than that.”

“So, was I just another opportunity to make the most of.” It’s hard to imagine Seigi being so deliberately callous. Richard has to believe that it was more likely a case of carelessness, much like Seigi’s tendency to say what’s on his mind before considering the effects of his words.

“No, it’s not- Richard, I didn’t think I was taking advantage of you.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.”

Seigi turns to face him again, although his eyes never look higher than Richard’s shoulder.

“Maybe that wasn’t the right way to say it. I mean, maybe it was more like - like a beautiful dream. When you know that you’re dreaming, and you know you’re going to wake up properly soon, so you try to remember it as much as possible so you can still have the good memories after it’s over.”

“Why does it have to be over?”

“Because you still have hopes of being with her again.”

“No, I do not.”

He doesn’t mean to snap. But he is tired of the conversation going around in circles.

“Seigi.” He takes a breath, tries to even out his voice. “Do you think me so callous that I could toy with someone’s affections while harbouring deeper feelings for someone else?” Seigi shakes his head. “Then why do you think I would want to be intimate with you, if I ultimately intended to reconnect with someone else?”

Seigi shrugs, his eyes fixed on the floor.

“People have brief love affairs, don’t they? Sometimes? Holiday romances?”

He draws a long breath, that comes back out as a sigh. How can he explain to Seigi that he is not the type of person to have brief, meaningless flings? That there had never been anyone before Deborah, and never anyone since, until Seigi sat with him in a police station for hours, late at night, to make sure the police officers took down every detail of the drunks who’d accosted him on his way home?

“Seigi.” He takes another breath, a steady one this time, and prepares himself. “Would it seem so strange to you, if I said I had intended more than just a brief affair?” Richard thinks back to their time together in Europe, trying to recall a single instance when he had actually said as much to Seigi. But, he realises, they never seemed to get as far as talking. Every moment together, in each hotel room, had been spent trying to learn each other’s bodies, realising they could simply *be* with each other, without having to fill every moment with talk.

But Seigi’s face still doesn’t seem to register understanding. It occurs to Richard, then, that he is going to have to finally put his feelings into words. The thought causes a brief flare of white-hot terror, until he reasons that his poor heart cannot possibly be broken any more than it already has. Even if he is completely honest, he has already experienced rejection from Seigi.

“When I first returned to England, you had just run off to tell your Tanimoto-san not to marry someone else. Perhaps I can admit to feeling a little rejected. You were always so careless with your compliments around me, that I could never be entirely certain what intentions lay behind them. Every time I dared get my hopes up that you might hold some deeper affection for me, you would say something to remind me how entranced you were by her. When you resolved to talk her out of marrying someone else, it felt to me as though you had made a choice, and with your decision so made, I decided, perhaps rashly, that seeing you seek happiness with her was too painful.”

“Richard?”

“Please, let me finish. I shut myself off to nurse my broken heart, convinced that you did not return the affection I felt toward you. And I understand now that, by not being honest sooner, I put you in much the same position, by not making it clear that I had no interest in reuniting with my ex-fiancé.

“But then, there you were. You came to find me, even though it must have cost you dearly. Admittedly, at the time, I was also concerned for your safety and confused by your attempts to deceive my cousin. But once you revealed your true intentions, it reignited that secret little spark in my heart. No one has ever gone to such lengths for me because they simply wanted me to be happy. Seeing you in London, knowing that you had travelled halfway around the world just to find me, made me happier than I thought possible.

“Seigi, I see now why you would think that my behaviour did not indicate a desire for anything more than a brief holiday affair. I should have taken the time to discuss things with you. But at the time-”

“We were both kinda carried away, huh?” At last, Seigi manages something akin to a real smile, meeting Richard’s eyes for just a second before he looks away again.

“Indeed. But now, with both of us back in Tokyo, with the shop open for business once again, my feelings have not changed. Seigi, my feelings for you run far deeper than the infatuation of a holiday fling.” He shifts his weight, stands up as straight as he can, and draws a breath to steady his nerves. “I will say it as clearly and concisely as possible, so that there can be no ambiguity. Seigi, I love you. As a friend, yes, but also as the person I cherish most in the world. When I wake up in the morning, I want to wake up beside you again, because you have seen me in the mornings and somehow not been deterred by how...how I *am*, when I wake up. When I finish work in the evenings, I want to come home to you, to hear you singing along to the radio, to smell the meals you prepare, and to sit and eat with you, because you make it feel like coming *home*. And I want every minute in between to be spent with you, or anticipating the moment when I get to be with you again. I want to build a life with you, because I cannot fathom one without you.”

Across the room, Seigi shakes his head, his face showing disbelief.

“Not with me,” he insists, his voice unsteady. “You don’t want that with me.”

“Didn’t I just say that I want exactly that?” He wants, so much, to cross the room, to close this gap between them and reach out for Seigi, as he has done so many times now. But Seigi leans back against the counter, his face still turned away, giving Richard the impression that he might be trapped there, with Richard blocking the doorway.

“I wouldn’t be good for you.”

“Why do you say that?”



“Because!” Seigi’s voice echoes off the tiles in the kitchen, startling Richard with his sudden loudness. “Because you’ve seen *him*. If you stayed with me, sooner or later, I’d-” He bites his lip, and presses a hand over his eyes. Richard wants desperately to hold him, but is aware that he is currently standing between Seigi and the door, and he does not want to make Seigi feel as though he is cornered there. “I’d ruin it. Sooner or later, one way or another. I don’t know how to be a good husband. But I know that relationships, sooner or later they stop being about wanting to be together all the time, and I don’t-” His voice seems to catch in his throat, and he shakes his head. “I don’t know what comes after that. I’d spoil it, I know I would, I’d say something or do something, and you’d realise I wasn’t right for you after all.”

When Seigi presses both hands to his eyes, Richard gives up on trying to keep a respectful distance. He pulls Seigi to him, arms tight around him. Seigi doesn’t hold him back, but he doesn’t pull away either; instead he presses his face into Richard’s neck, biting back a shuddering sob that causes his whole body to shake. Richard holds him through it, making what he hopes are soothing noises. He knows, he thinks, what Seigi is hinting at, and the reality of it makes his heart ache, makes him hold even tighter as Seigi tries to calm himself.

“Why don’t I make us some tea?” he says, eventually, because he has no idea how to work through Seigi’s lifetime of pain, but he does know that a cup of tea is always a good start when someone needs to feel better.

He shoos Seigi off to the bathroom before taking out everything he needs to make two cups of tea. The kitchen is truly gleaming, everything in its rightful place again as though neither of them have been away, and as he heats up the milk he wonders if he ever had a chance of keeping the place so well organised if he’d never hired Seigi in the first place. Maybe he would have hired a professional cleaner, but then he would still have been responsible for keeping the cupboards stocked, and making sure there was always fresh milk. Most likely, he’d have been throwing away spoiled milk after buying too much, or running out mid-afternoon and having to offer his customers bottled water or green tea instead. He finds himself thinking back to their month in Jeffrey’s Kensington flat, and how he never once had to worry whether there was enough in the fridge for breakfast, or enough toilet roll in the bathroom, because Seigi somehow always seemed to know what the place needed. What Richard needed.

He takes his time, until he has two cups of royal milk tea. The Noritake cups come out of the cupboard for the first time since his return, and it’s clear that Seigi has cleaned them out at some point during the day, as there isn’t a single speck of dust on them. Before picking up the tray, he slips a hand into his pocket and feels for the familiar weight of the ring, grown cold from not being on his hand.

When he takes the tea out to the main room, Seigi is sitting in one of the red chairs, a wadded up tissue in his hand. His eyes and nose are red, but he has at least stopped crying, and manages to raise a weak smile. He accepts the cup of tea, and sips at it, his eyes slipping closed for a moment, and Richard realises it is the first time he’s seen Seigi drink tea all day.

“If your mother had been in some great distress, do you think your father would have spent all his savings to travel halfway around the world to help her?”

“Huh?” Seigi scowls over his teacup. “Why would you ask that?”

“Answer the question, please,” he says, his tone as gentle as he can make it.

“Of course he wouldn’t. Not unless there was something in it for him.”

“And do you think he would have risked a life in prison to help someone else? Even if it meant he

might never see that person again?”

“No!”

“Seigi, you are not your father. It is true that you have very little experience of romantic relationships. But you know how to be kind, and selfless. And somehow, you seem to know what I need. May I confess something to you?”

“Sure.”

Richard looks down at his cup, and for a moment he traces a finger along the delicate gold band around it.

“I’m not sure what conclusions you have come to, but the truth is that I am not much more well versed than you when it comes to romance and relationships.”

“Hah?” The look on Seigi’s face is almost comical, and Richard allows himself a small smile.

“There was Deborah. And then there was you. No one else.” Seigi shakes his head

as if in disbelief. “Do you think I would lie to you? I do not know any secret formula for making a relationship work. I just know that it *is* work, in a sense, in that it requires compromise and talk and learning to give what the other needs. And there is risk, in laying one’s feelings out in the open, knowing they might not be returned, only hoping that the risk is worth it in the end.” He sips his tea, and waits, but Seigi doesn’t say anything. “I have taken a risk, Seigi. Was it worth it?”

Seigi looks down at his cup, his face tight with concentration. Richard waits.

“I’ll mess up.”

“So will I.”

“I’ll get jealous, when you’re travelling the world, spending time with rich and beautiful people.”

“You think I won’t feel the same when you tell me all about your day at college, with carefree young people who invite you out to drink or to study with them? Seigi, I don’t know what comes after the part where you want to be together every second of the day. But I think you’re worth trying for.”

Seigi sets his teacup down on the low table between them. Once again, his face creases into an almost-frown, like he’s trying to plan out his words.

“I convinced myself that three weeks would be enough. That maybe, in a few years, if I was some tired civil servant in a little apartment somewhere, spending my evenings alone, I could look back and think, ‘for three weeks, the most beautiful person in the world was all mine’, and that would be enough. Whatever happened after that, I would have had three weeks of being the luckiest person in the whole world, and that’s more than some people ever get. Then we got to Paris, and I realised the three weeks were coming to an end, and I felt so selfish for wanting more. I was like a drunk who knew he’d had too much and knew he’d have to stop, but still craved the taste of another drink. So I decided I had to cut myself off.”

“Is that why you left early?”

Seigi nods.

“I woke up the next morning and saw your face on the pillow next to mine, and I thought, ‘If I stop now, it was always good, it never got spoiled’.”

“How did you get back?” That question has been worrying away at the back of Richard’s mind all week.

“I still had the pre-paid credit card, with Jeffrey’s money. I barely touched it while we were in Kensington, and you’d told me there was more than enough for a flight back to Tokyo. Plus I had the Oyster card. Train to Heathrow, flight to Haneda, just like you’d said I could if I needed to.”

Richard puts down his cup, and stands. When Seigi looks up at him, Richard holds out a hand. Seigi takes it, and lets Richard pull him to his feet.

“You are brave, and you are resourceful,” Richard tells him, “and when things go wrong, you have an almost troublesome habit of looking for a way to fix them.” Seigi gives a wet, snuffly laugh that he muffles with his tissue, and Richard feels his own mouth twitch up at the corner. “I trust you to want to try.” When Richard pulls him close, Seigi doesn’t protest. “But more than anything else...”

“What?”

“More than anything else...I do not want to have to ask Jeffrey to arrange a separation.”

Seigi laughs, and presses his face to Richard’s shoulder. Richard wraps his arms tight around Seigi and holds him until his shoulders stop shaking.

“No, more than anything else,” Richard says, as Seigi leans back just enough to look at him, “more than anything else in the whole world, I love you.”

He puts a hand to Seigi’s cheek, feeling the heat there. He traces the curve of Seigi’s lower lip with his thumb, entranced as Seigi’s eyes close and his mouth opens just a fraction. He brushes his hand over Seigi’s hair where it still stands askew at the front, from Seigi running his hand through it while he worked, and when Seigi does not flinch away from any of his touches, Richard tilts his head just enough to kiss him.

The doorbell rings almost as soon as they start, and Seigi laughs some more as Richard scowls over his shoulder at the closed door.

“I’ll go make some tea,” Seigi says, and Richard lets him go, grabbing his hand to give it one last squeeze before he goes to let in his next customer.

It is dark outside when they close the shop for the day, and Seigi waits for him to lock the door, hands deep in the pockets of his coat.

“I never said it back,” Seigi says out of nowhere, as they walk down the steps together.

“That’s quite alright. It was not conditional when I said it.”

“I want to get there. I want to get to where you are. Be able to say it with complete certainty.”

“That sounds like a fine ambition.”

When they reach the end of the street, they both pause, as Richard realises he doesn’t know which way Seigi is headed.

“Are you currently staying at your mother’s house?”

“Yeah. The train journey’s not too long from here, so it won’t be too late when I get back.”

“It will be well past dinnertime, though.”

“Hiromi’s fine with that. She said she’d keep something warm for me.”

Richard looks up the street, and thinks about going back to his hotel room alone.

“We could go somewhere for dinner.”

“Ah, I don’t want to miss the last train.”

“I have a hotel room.”

It’s dark, so it’s hard to see Seigi’s face clearly, to gauge his reaction.

“I’d have to call Hiromi and let her know.”

“I could call her for you. Say it was my fault, that our work ran over.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand. I mean, she can’t exactly tell me I can’t spend the night with my husband.”

“Seigi!”

“Can we go to Shiseido Parlour? I’m starving!”

It’s dark, and there are few people around, so there is no one around to see when Richard slips his hand around Seigi’s arm before setting off along the street.

“My husband is so demanding.”

“Well, my husband had better eat something besides strawberry parfait for dinner, or one day all his teeth will fall out.”

“Your husband is paying the bill and can order whatever he likes.”

“My husband.”

“And mine.”

# Epilogue

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Richard waits by the front door, hoping the fresh morning air will help to calm his nerves and chill his flushed cheeks. There is no real need to be nervous. Their guests today number only four, and the process is far more simple this time around. But this time, it feels like something far more special.

Seigi is smiling when he finally steps outside, closing the door behind him. They only stopped by Jewellery Etranger to collect some things from the office safe, but then Seigi needed to use the bathroom, and then insisted he had to check there was enough milk in the fridge for tomorrow, and now Richard is anxious about the time even though they still aren't due at the registry office for another hour.

"Did Saul's plane get in on time?" Seigi asks, as he brushes down his suit jacket and straightens his tie.

"A little later than expected, but he was able to check into his hotel last night."

"And will Henry be able to get to the registry office by himself? It's his first time in Japan, and I know he's been taking lessons but it's different actually being in a strange country by yourself for the first time."

"I booked a taxi for him myself."

"Hiromi said she'd text me when they were on their way." Seigi pulls out his phone to check, but Richard takes it from him with a gentle hand.

"Everything is going to be fine today. We've already met with the registrar and gone over the process. Everyone will be there, on time, looking their best, and as soon as it is over, we will go for lunch and I can sit through Saul telling every single embarrassing story about me he can think of."

He takes Seigi's hand and gives it a bit of a squeeze. He means to let go before they set off toward the car, but Seigi holds on tight. When Richard turns to look at him, Seigi clasps both his hands around Richard's, before dropping to his knee, right there on the pavement outside the shop.

"I know we've done everything in completely the wrong order," he begins, as Richard automatically looks down the street to see if anyone is watching. "We got married, then you kissed me, and then we said we loved one another. And in all of that, neither of us ever actually did this. So, since we're registering in Tokyo, I want to make sure we do at least one thing properly."

"Seigi, you really don't have to do this." He tugs his hand back, but Seigi doesn't let go.

"Richard." He looks up, and his face, even after five years, is every bit as earnest and innocent as the first time they met. "Will you marry me?"

"We're already married. Or civil partnered. You're going to scuff your trousers."

"I don't care. I want to do this properly. I mean, I don't have a ring to ask with, because we already have one set and the others are in my pocket for the ceremony. But at some point, with two weddings, at least one of us should get to be proposed to, don't you think?"

“I’m marrying a fool.”

“You already married me, five years ago, and now you’re going to do it all over again.”

“Come on, a minute ago you were worried about being late.”

“They’ll wait for us. They can’t do anything else until we arrive.”

“My husband is a fool.” He tugs at his hand again, and Seigi finally stands, laughing as he brushes off the knee of his trousers. He keeps hold of Richard’s hand, though, and before Richard can say anything else, Seigi brings the hand up to his lips and kisses it, right over the ring he’s been wearing for the past five years.

“Well, my husband had better not eat more than his fair share of cake today.”

Richard pulls their joined hands towards himself, and returns the kiss, on the knuckle above Seigi’s gold-and-platinum band. In an hour, he will add to it a second band, inset with one white sapphire, after which Seigi will match his with a pink sapphire set into a white gold band, and this time, when they say their vows, he knows they will mean every single word.

## Chapter End Notes

And that's it!

Thanks for sticking with me through another long one. I didn't know how long this was going to be when I first started planning, but I knew right from the start that this was the ending I was working towards. Thank you to everyone who has read and commented and bookmarked and kudosed - I am sorry if I didn't respond to every single comment individually (it's been a rough few months for me so I haven't always been able to make more words, but I read every single one and they honestly have kept me going when I've been stressed over other things).

I'm going to take a little break from fandom creativity for a little while - I've been planning to do NaNoWriMo, and I still intend to start, even though I now only have a one-day break before day 1! Do follow me on Twitter @oldanimefan or on Tumblr @fanofacertainage, where I occasionally post about anime and manga and writing and other fun stuff.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!