

GRAY MEN

by
Tomotake Ishikawa

Translated by
Jonathan Lloyd-Davies



Copyright © 2013
by Golden Elephant Committee/Tomotake Ishikawa

All rights reserved.

Published by Vertical, Inc., New York

ISBN 978-1-935654-50-6

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition

Vertical, Inc.
451 Park Avenue South, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10016
www.vertical-inc.com

CHAPTER 1

1

I recalled a proverb: “The weather’s bad when it rains.” It’s a metaphor for the obvious, the self-evident.

The strong persecute the weak.

I guess that’s par for the course, too.

Enduring his usual headache, Ryotaro stared vacantly into the locker. His legs burned, stiff with fatigue, barely able to support his exhausted frame.

His office locker contained a bag stuffed with his valuables and a change of clothes. A cloudy-white liquid had been poured into the bag, giving off a stomach-churning stench.

Rancid milk. Ryotaro fished the contents out of his bag one by one, dwelling on the thought. The awful stink of the liquid made breathing a chore. He held his breath and continued to work. *Just like schoolyard bullies.* Ryotaro cursed them, but no anger welled up. There was no space for it. His heart was buried so deep in despair and exhaustion, he couldn’t “afford” it.

He had just finished emptying the bag and sighed heavily when, as though on cue, somebody came into the office.

“What’s that smell?” came Yoshimura’s husky voice from

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

behind. Just hearing it was enough to make Ryotaro's stomach wince in pain.

Shinohara, his face twisted in an attempt to suppress laughter, said "What, indeed," and let out a cackle as offensive to the ear as a nail scraping down a blackboard. With his generous portions of flab, Shinohara reminded Ryotaro of a swollen rice cake.

"So you're the culprit, Sakuma?"

Ryotaro twisted his trembling body to face in the direction of Yoshimura's menacing voice.

"What the hell is it? The whole damn office stinks. Is that your B.O., Sakuma?" Yoshimura gave Ryotaro a scornful look, the corners of his mouth curled tight. He stood with his chest thrust forward to boost up his needle-thin frame—all the better to intimidate.

Ryotaro smiled vaguely. The expression was a survival technique, the only response that would be forgiven in this scenario.

"Look at that smirk. Makes me sick," Yoshimura spat. He was the only person in the store with a spare key to the locker so it was pretty easy to narrow down the suspects. But Ryotaro couldn't say a thing.

"You're useless at work, you don't speak, you got a creepy smile, and you mess up your locker. As if your stench wasn't bad enough already. I'm sick of looking at you, so hurry up and deal with this, clean up and get outta here. And don't forget to lock up. We've got an important exhibition in two days. Why don't you go get some plastic surgery, fix up that glum mug of yours while you're at it," Yoshimura barked before leaving through the back door.

"Pardon me for leaving first!" Shinohara jeered before bustling out in Yoshimura's wake.

Left alone, Ryotaro emptied the liquid from his bag into the toilet and then wiped the inside with toilet paper. He spent about an hour cleaning the empty store in silence. He couldn't let his mind wander, as missing anything would be reason enough for another tongue-lashing.

Having spent the entire day on his feet without a single break,

GRAY MEN

his body didn't respond properly. By the time he finished cleaning he was so worn out he felt he might collapse at any moment.

He made sure all the doors were locked, set the alarms, and turned off the lights. Ryotaro sighed and, stinking bag in tow, left the jewelry store.

August, 2013.

Outside, it was a humid and sultry night. Dampness hung stagnant in the windless air. Ryotaro walked towards the station. He immediately began to sweat and his shirt clung to his skin. Eleven o'clock. Hardly anyone around.

He caught an image of himself reflected in the store window and inadvertently came to a stop.

He traced a hand over his sunken cheeks, combed it through his grown-out hair. Exhaustion led to him spending his days off sleeping, so he couldn't even muster the time to get a haircut. He hardly ate a decent meal, which was probably why he looked pale and sickly—the overall impression was that of ill health.

Ryotaro let out a heavy sigh and concentrated on moving his legs forward. Suddenly, everything before him went black.

“Shit...”

Anemia. Clenching his teeth, he just managed to overcome the urge to pass out and started to walk again. Working all day while hardly eating a thing had left him feeling ill.

Yoshimura, the manager of the store, always made sure to find something for Ryotaro to do when it was his time for a break, which meant Ryotaro never had the chance to eat or rest. He worked over a hundred hours of overtime a month, but of course, he was never paid for any of it.

By the end of the day, Ryotaro would be a barely breathing zombie. Even after finally getting to sleep he would frequently wake during the night. He never felt properly rested and was consumed by physical and mental exhaustion.

He boarded the Keihin-Tohoku train and found an empty seat. He mindlessly flicked open his cell phone, but no one had called. His hand that held the phone trembled from sheer fatigue.

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

He fought off drowsiness as the train rocked and swayed during the half-hour trip to Tsurumi Station. He peeled himself up from his sunken position in the seat, stepped down to the platform, and staggered unsteadily through the exit.

He was so tired he no longer had an appetite. He went through the compulsory motions of buying a couple of rice balls from the convenience store in front of the station, then started the walk home.

Ryotaro's apartment was in a neglected thirty-year-old building roughly fifteen minutes from the station. Entering the cramped one-room space, Ryotaro mechanically flicked the switch to turn on the TV and collapsed into bed. The dispassionate voice of a female newscaster flowed from the TV, vibrating the air in the room.

Fearing shortages of the resource, China, which controls 93 percent of the market, and other resource-rich countries including the U.S., Australia, Canada, Greenland, and South Africa have declared restrictions on the exports of rare earth minerals. Accordingly, Japan, which has no such resources of its own, must now explore potential substitutes and alternative supply routes.

His body sank heavy as lead into the long-unaired futon. The sensation of descending into darkness was luscious. *How great it would be never to have to wake up. I don't want to open my eyes again.* Ryotaro held the thought, wishing from his heart for it to be true.

Rare earths, an essential resource for national security and industry, are also used in household items such as digital cameras, digital audio players, cell phones, and laptop computers. A shortage in rare earths could cause Japan's industry to stagnate.

A life of being bullied day in, day out by your superiors, of constantly having your character belittled, with no escape. Was there any value to putting up with a life like that? Was there really

GRAY MEN

any meaning in a life where you're screamed at for being a waste of space, where you have to chip away at your sleep and force a smile just to receive a meager salary?

Substitutes are being developed but have not reached viability. In an attempt to bring a solution to the issue, the government has decided to inject 500 billion yen into the Tomosun Corporation, which holds mining rights in parts of Mongolia. Enough rare earths have been discovered in these areas to break free from dependence on China. The financing decision will enable Japan to secure a significant quantity of rare earth resources. In addition, profits expected from exporting excess levels of rare earths to other countries.

The seemingly endless monologue broke off and was followed briefly by a man's voice—his throat likely a casualty to smoking—before ceding to a commercial.

The music from the ad piqued Ryotaro's attention. He glanced across to the heretofore unwatched screen.

Chopin's Revolutionary Etude.

Ryotaro blinked and tried to focus. The video, ill-matched to the music, was some footage for a shipping company: a truck driving down a road, followed by a superimposed company logo and a voiceover of a short message: "Creating new value in logistics!"

That was the whole of the commercial, but for some reason it left an impression.

The company had been a hot topic in the financial papers about two years ago. An obscure venture business had acquired the sixth-ranked company in the industry, then soon afterwards had bought up the third and the fourth. Through expanding and streamlining their distribution networks, the company had brought about a breakthrough low-cost "revolution" and now ranked in the top class of the industry. But it had its mysteries; it never went to an IPO, and the CEO eschewed media exposure.

The next commercial was a generic beer advertisement. An actress wearing an ear-to-ear smile held a glass of beer to her cheek, chattering away. Ryotaro remembered that he had some

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

beer in the fridge and, grimacing, got slowly up.

He pulled out a beer and sat back on the bed, gulped down half the bottle, and crammed one of the rice balls into his mouth. The food didn't taste like anything.

He felt his body flush, not from the alcohol but from a thought: *It wasn't supposed to be like this...*

Ryotaro had lost both his parents at an early age and was raised at his aunt's along with his younger brother. Having no children of her own, she had been loving—they had never felt anything particularly lacking—but Ryotaro had spent his days subconsciously on edge, some part of him always harboring a nagging discomfort. Perhaps because of this, he had resolved to find work in Tokyo after graduating university. But the tough job market at the time had meant a string of rejected applications, and he found himself with nowhere to go. By the time it dawned that he couldn't afford to be choosy, most company recruitment windows had already closed.

He ended up helplessly relying on an introduction from his aunt to get a job at a jewelry store in Tokyo. He had not been eager at first, having no particular interest in jewelry and no customer service skills to speak of, but on starting, the working conditions and pay seemed good enough. He had ended up drifting into the decision to stay with the job.

Then a single incident caused everything to go downhill.

Now his days were spent in misery; he was put to work like a packhorse, hounded incessantly. Worked to exhaustion day after day, he no longer maintained any meaningful personal relationships. He had been living this hellish existence for half a year. He had considered leaving but felt obligated to his aunt and also had to pay tuition for his brother, who enrolled at a college prep school after failing his university entrance exams. He couldn't quit. Besides, the recession meant that the chances of finding new work would be low.

Ryotaro washed the rice ball down with some beer and reflected on his day-to-day life. *How have I ended up like this?* The thought weighed heavy on his heart.

GRAY MEN

Casually glancing downwards, he caught sight of the insurance documents on the table. For the past few days he had been closely scrutinizing the contents of a life insurance policy he had taken out on his aunt's suggestion. It seemed the policy, which he had taken out immediately when he started work, would pay out a certain amount even in the event of suicide. It wasn't much, but it would probably be enough to cover his brother's tuition.

I want out of this cursed existence. I've got this ridiculous quota for the exhibition in two days. Who knows what they'll do to me if I don't meet it...

Ryotaro squeezed his eyes shut and sat rocking for some time. The depths of his body ached in silence.

The noise of the TV, the meticulous ticking of the clock, the din of traffic. The sound of a heart breaking.

Ryotaro opened his eyes and made his decision.

He had lived for twenty-six years. It felt like more than enough.

2

Ryotaro opened his heavy eyelids to a jarring electronic noise.

A white ceiling dominated his field of vision. Hanging directly overhead, it felt like it was bearing down on him.

Ryotaro brushed his damp cotton blanket to one side, got up, and walked over to the mirror above the sink. The same reflection as always, no change. He looked sick, like a green pepper.

He rinsed out his mouth and, without washing his face, crossed to the living area.

5:30 a.m.

It was bright enough outside, but he felt no desire to open the curtains. He made toast and put on some coffee in the half-light. He conveyed them to his mouth and swallowed robotically.

It was a still morning. As per his routine, Ryotaro put on a work shirt and looped a tie around his collar. He stared at his black suit on its hanger for a while, then put it on.

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

When he stepped outside, the air was still fairly cool.

He came to a brief stop and took a deep breath before starting to walk, keeping the same pace as always.

He took the work-bound Keihin-Tohoku Line train, but a short time later got off at Kamata station and changed to the Tokyu-Tamagawa Line.

People cycled through, boarding and leaving the train. There were many different types of faces, but they all had the same tired expression. Ryotaro wondered how long he had been on the swaying train. He heard the name of a station announced:

“Tamagawa, Tamagawa.”

He decided to get off. He rushed from the station as though fleeing, pushing through the crowds of people flowing in. Before him sprawled the Tama River. The dull-hued, gently undulating surface of the water reflected the morning sun.

For some time, Ryotaro wandered aimlessly along the riverbank. He found a dilapidated bench and sat down.

The time was 9:25. Five minutes until he was supposed to clock in. Ryotaro switched off his phone, only feeling a slight twinge of guilt. He looked around the lonely area. People were sparse, perhaps because it was a weekday. He dragged himself up and started to walk with a purposeful stride. He tried to imagine where he would die as he made a pilgrimage out of finding the perfect place.

Soon, I will die.

Ryotaro thought about the rope in his bag. It was white and sturdy, the type used on sailboats. He'd purchased it from a houseware store. He traced the riverside for close to an hour. He was having difficulty finding somewhere suitable. He branched away from the river and began to explore further afield. A quietly disintegrating shack, a forgotten shrine, gentle, lushly forested hills. None fitted his ideal location.

He took off his jacket and loosened his tie. His calves and the soles of his feet ached since he'd been walking for a while. He kept his eyes down, avoiding eye contact with others. The scent of incense tickled his nostrils as he passed a temple—the

GRAY MEN

Dairakuin. He found himself coming to a stop as he glanced up at the gate. For some reason, it felt as though it had been opened for him. Before he realized it, Ryotaro ducked inside.

The grounds were hushed and deserted. The buildings were decrepit for a metropolitan temple, the main gate warped with rain and pockmarked from termite damage. The main hall had an imposing carving of a dragon on its roof and the stone lanterns leading up to the building were engraved with a similar motif. The temple had all the signs of importance, but no one seemed to be maintaining it. The roof was missing tiles, and the enclosing wall was discolored and crooked, its paint peeling. Strangely, the atmosphere was not one of ruin; rather, there was an air of graceful calm often lacking at more splendid and luxurious temples.

Ryotaro admired the grounds for a while. Then, as though something was urging him on, he started to walk down the narrow path lined with stepping stones that led towards the cemetery at the back. The thought hit him that visiting the dead would perhaps give him some kind of insight into death. But when he arrived, the dead had nothing to show him, remaining silent under their tombstones. Ryotaro noticed some incense burning at a grave off to one side. Suddenly wary, he started to walk towards it. Had someone just been there? There was an arrangement of irises and the incense was still new. Ryotaro cast his gaze around, but there was no one to be seen.

He looked at the grave again. Sprigs of white clover bloomed along the sides. The small flowers stirred in the breeze. Ryotaro stared at the tombstone for some time and realized that he had unconsciously pressed his hands together. He pulled them apart and rushed out of the Dairakuin temple as though running from something. His face was burning red. He felt disgusted for having appealed to the dead for salvation. He went back to following the Tama River and redoubled his efforts to find a place to die.

I should just do it at home, a thought crossed his mind, but his legs refused to stop. He was ready to kill himself, but the idea of simply decomposing, of no one finding him, was too horrible.

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

He wanted somewhere to kill himself without interference, but only if his body could be easily discovered.

He continued on until he found himself getting close to Tamagawa Station again. He looked around and sighed. His gaze fell on a sign: *The Kamenokoyama Tomb*. Without thinking, Ryotaro turned to follow the direction it pointed toward.

At the end of a route lined with grand houses, he came to a grove of various types of trees. He stepped off the road. The ground was damp despite the lack of rain, probably due to the cover of trees. The copse was well-maintained with a walking path, the kind people would visit for some light walking during the weekend.

Not bad.

Being a weekday afternoon, the grove was empty and quiet, as if forgotten. Ryotaro followed the hiking path through the cool seclusion of the woods.

The Tama River was intermittently visible between the trees. Here and there, blue tarp tents were rigged among the shadowed thickets, shying from view.

Something about the place, far removed from the daily grind, helped harden Ryotaro's resolve. The air was cool despite it being a summer afternoon, and occasional streams of light poked through the trees to stroke his skin. Ryotaro felt a tiny seed of relief take root inside his despair-laden heart. If he could just hold onto it, life might be worth living. But to return to the real world was to return to his life of purgatory.

Hope was the last thing he needed.

He bought a can of coffee from a solitary vending machine and found a stone bench to sit on and cracked the can open. The sound reverberated gratifyingly.

As he sipped at the coffee, vaguely considering that it could be his last, he heard a voice.

He felt his body stiffen. He turned to look, keeping his head down.

A mother and her child. The young girl was chattering excitedly, clinging to her mother as they walked by. Ryotaro stayed

GRAY MEN

motionless, watching them pass.

“So pretty,” the young mother said as she held her daughter’s hand.

The girl nodded happily. “Red-orange!” she called out, her voice filled with joy, pointing to the sky that peeked out between the tree branches.

The mother beamed with delight. The innocence of the girl’s voice carried Ryotaro’s glance to the sky, but he looked straight back down and sighed deeply.

“That’s right! Red-orange,” the mother’s voice echoed softly.

Ryotaro narrowed his eyes as he watched them. They were like the embodiment of happiness. They had bright futures before them.

Polar opposites of a wretched guy like me.

But he felt no envy. He had only himself to blame for his predicament.

He took another sip of his coffee as he watched the duo fade into the distance. The sweetness that spread inside his mouth brought on a wave of sentiment.

He looked back at the sky, but he was no longer able to discern its beauty. The crimson of the sky appeared gray.

Death was close, he knew it.

He retained almost no memories of his deceased parents. His aunt who raised him often took him and his brother on walks. His brother had loved her as he might have his real mother. Like the girl that had just passed he would cling to her, his face beaming. Ryotaro would watch them, always a step behind. It wasn’t that she failed to treat him with love. It was just that a part of him had always felt awkward.

“Is this seat taken?” came a voice from behind. Ryotaro jumped and swung around.

There stood a man in gray.

The man was over six feet tall and dressed in a gray suit with a gray waistcoat; even his tie was gray. His shoes were black, but they might as well have been gray. The whole attire looked

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

immaculate on him. Apart from the glint of his jet-black eyes and his wavy black hair, everything about the man was gray.

His age was impossible to pin down. He looked young yet old at the same time. The deep wrinkles carved across his face like marks of suffering contributed to the uncertainty.

The man held Ryotaro's gaze with a peculiar expression. Ryotaro couldn't tell if it was a smile or a grimace.

"...Gray."

The shock of this man appearing from nowhere caused Ryotaro to blurt out that word because he immediately thought of the Gray aliens. It wasn't that the man bore any actual resemblance to the typical image of a Gray with its oversized head and eyes and shrunken frame. Something about his presence was so unreal it seemed only natural to compare him to extraterrestrial life. Ryotaro had the inkling that if Grays did exist, they would probably look like the man before him.

The man cocked his head to one side and chuckled. "May I sit here?"

The words brought Ryotaro back from his reverie. He looked around with wide eyes. There were three other benches, all of them free.

"Sure..." he answered vaguely and nodded, aware that his face was turning red.

Still smiling, the man sat next to him. The man's gaze was fixed towards the path so that Ryotaro could only see his face in profile. Although he had a prominent nose and the length of his crossed legs suggested he was a foreigner, he seemed somehow Japanese, too. Ryotaro would have believed him to be Middle Eastern, even European if the man said so. His nationality was totally unclear.

The man's long hair hung in dark waves with bangs that reached his eyes and covered half of his small face. When the man turned towards Ryotaro in reaction to his staring, Ryotaro hurriedly looked away.

A vibration in the air told Ryotaro that this had made the man laugh.

GRAY MEN

“Gray?” the man inquired softly.

Ryotaro hesitantly returned the man’s look. The man stared at him with large eyes filled with determination.

“Err... Sorry, it’s nothing,” Ryotaro replied, wanting to deflect the intense curiosity behind the man’s gaze.

Perhaps feeling that he was being shunned, the man narrowed his eyes and lifted the corners of his mouth into a smile. “I must seem quite the suspicious character.”

Ryotaro hesitated for a moment before nodding slightly. The man’s smile was warm, enveloping.

“It’s only natural that, from your perspective, I appear suspicious. But, as the word suggests, I am merely questionable—certainly not dangerous. Are you the type to punish the suspicious?”

Ryotaro shook his head, maintaining his look of apprehension. Even so, he felt vaguely amused by the man’s phrase: *the type to punish the suspicious*.

“Good, for the time being it seems I’m safe from punishment. Next, would you implement torture—such as used during witch trials—to determine the true form of someone you deemed suspicious?”

Ryotaro shook his head at the man’s bizarre words.

“Good, I’m relieved. A narrow escape, but it doesn’t look like I’m going to be burned at the stake. I don’t mind heat, but being lit on fire would be a little too much.” The man smiled brightly, then continued. “Last question—would you feel uncomfortable if we kept on talking? I do not mind your impressions of me, but it is not my wish to make you feel uncomfortable. And don’t worry, I’m not here to sell you on religion.” The man peered into Ryotaro’s face as he spoke.

The man was trying to diffuse the tension in the air. This realization caused Ryotaro to break into a broad smile. “Sorry, I’m a little shy with strangers.”

The man laughed bashfully in response. “There’s nothing wrong with that. Shy people tend to be quite thoughtful. Personally, I believe that it’s very important to carefully scrutinize things in life. Of course, there is the tendency to over-think things and

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

become depressed.”

Ryotaro stared fixedly at this man who had appeared from nowhere and who looked completely out of place, like he had escaped from a movie. His looks were utterly unique and his voice was deep enough to shake the earth. The more Ryotaro looked at him, the more he was convinced that the fellow wasn't human. At the same time, their conversation made him seem more approachable than when Ryotaro had first caught sight of him.

“Please don't take offense, but when I saw you just now the first thing I thought of was the Grays.”

“Grays?” the man repeated, tilting his head to one side.

“The aliens, Grays. Err... Not to say that you actually look like a stereotypical Gray. Just that there was something a little alien about you. How should I say this...” Ryotaro stopped, becoming flustered as he tried not to insult the man.

The man listened quietly and looked up at the sky before nodding in apparent satisfaction. “So I reminded you of the Gray aliens? I wouldn't say that's rude at all. If anything, I feel honored.”

“Honored?” Now it was Ryotaro's turn to ask a question.

“Think about it,” the man's large eyes glistened. “Being a Gray means being something other than human. I wonder, is there compliment greater than being told you're not human?”

Ryotaro laughed ambiguously, unsure of how to reply.

“Well, would you be happy to be thought of as human?”

“It's just ordinary, I guess... So I wouldn't be happy per se.”

“Sure. So, would it feel good to be thought of as *ordinary*? Ordinary, in other words normal, commonplace.”

“I guess that doesn't sound too good.” Ryotaro was beginning to enjoy the man's word games.

“It follows, then, that you would rather someone you've just met to think of you as not human, but a Gray.”

“No one's ever said that to me, so I wouldn't really know...”

“Nor did I, until now. I'd never known the happiness of being mistaken for a Gray,” the man chuckled classily, clearing enjoying himself. Then, suddenly quiet, he looked Ryotaro from

GRAY MEN

head to toe. Finally, he said, “You don’t look like a Gray, by the way.”

“That’s a shame,” Ryotaro responded with a grimace and sipped his coffee.

The man re-crossed his legs and rubbed his fingers against his sharp chin. Each movement was executed with a natural grace. Ryotaro bit his lip, suddenly wondering if he was dreaming. Surprised at the cliché, a laugh bubbled up from inside him. A deeply heartfelt, genuine laugh.

“Did I miss something?” the man asked, slightly angling his head. The burning determination behind his eyes made Ryotaro want to cling to him. Words started to spill forth the moment he formed thoughts.

“Things...have been very difficult.”

As he said as much, Ryotaro felt his body grow heavy, like lead. He couldn’t expect whining would make this man help him. It was nothing more than self-gratification. Ryotaro felt disgusted with himself and scowled deeply.

The man’s eyes, unblinking, remained focused on Ryotaro’s profile. He nodded slightly, like something had been clarified.

“This is a day you should commemorate. Your first close encounter of the third kind. May we talk a little longer?”

“Yes.” Ryotaro finally managed a nod.

“What was it that made you think of me as a Gray? I should tell you, no one has ever mistaken me for one before.”

“Y-Your clothes. Anyone would...”

The man made a surprised face, as though he had somehow failed to notice that he was dressed completely in gray. He plucked at his suit with his long fingers. “I don’t like clothes that stand out,” he stated softly.

You stand out well enough, thought Ryotaro, but said nothing.

The man looked back to the path. “May I ask you a question?” he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

“Of course,” Ryotaro answered, letting out some of the tension in his shoulders.

“Looking at your suit, I’d say you’re employed somewhere.

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

It's not normal for you to be in this type of place at this time on a weekday, correct?"

Ryotaro sat in silence, having no idea how to answer the question.

"Perhaps you're paid to spend your days fighting evil and saving the world?"

"Nope," Ryotaro corrected, the man's words making him smile.

"Maybe you're a UFO researcher on the lookout for Grays?"

"Definitely not."

"Don't tell me you're from Area 51 in the U.S., here to capture Grays?"

"Just an ordinary salaryman at a jeweler's in Okachimachi," Ryotaro answered honestly. He feared that the conversation would become increasingly absurd unless he told the truth.

The man looked down, appearing to be in deep thought, then quickly looked back up. "So what is a regular salaryman doing in a place like this?"

Ryotaro was lost for an answer. He couldn't possibly tell him he had come here looking for a place to die. There was no point in saying so, and putting it into words might cause his conviction to waver. Ryotaro screwed his lips shut.

The man laughed cautiously as if picking up shards of broken glass, eyes still on Ryotaro. "Whatever your reason, you're here and the two of us met."

The words made Ryotaro look up to meet the man's stare. "And just who are you?" he asked. The man's eyes narrowed, as though he had been waiting for the question.

"Me? My name is Gray." The man grinned briskly and gave a bow. "From now on, that will be how I introduce myself," he added. Gray stood up and extended a hand to Ryotaro, still on the bench. "What are you doing after this...uh..."

"Ryotaro, my name's Ryotaro Sakuma," Ryotaro said, self-consciously shaking Gray's hand as he stood up.

"Ryo-ta-ro... Ryotaro, Ryotaro." Gray put his right index finger to his temple, making a show of memorizing the name.

GRAY MEN

“Ryotaro, what are you doing after this?” Gray’s powerful eyes focused on him.

“I’m not really sure,” Ryotaro dodged as he struggled for words. *I’m going to die. I’ve made up my mind. So what if I’ve met this off man. It’s too late to go back on it now.*

Gray watched as Ryotaro made to shut him out. Then he ventured cautiously, “Please forgive me, I know we have only just met. But...” the man paused for a moment. When he continued, it was with a whimsically light tone of voice: “Would you reconsider dying and help me with something instead?”

The words almost caused Ryotaro’s heart to leap out of his chest.

3

Electronic noise.

Ryotaro awoke to the strangely comforting sound of his clock. He sat up and checked the time: 12 p.m.

Ryotaro walked drowsily over to the sink and gave a long yawn. He had slept well for the first time in ages and felt a little better.

He made some toast in the kitchen and ate brunch, then got into his suit. He left the apartment at 2 p.m. and began his journey to the National Diet train station. He took the Tokyo Metro Chiyoda Line and then changed to the JR Keihin Tohoku Line before arriving at the National Diet and went into the Grand Capital Hotel just across from the station.

He found the waiting room where Shinohara and shop manager Yoshimura already stood waiting along with the rest of the staff.

“Hey! Yesterday you go AWOL and today you’re the last to show up. Are you trying to fuck with me?” Yoshimura glared at Ryotaro, his cheeks twitching neurotically.

Ryotaro felt suddenly ill, as though he had plunged to the bottom of a deep valley. He had taken yesterday off, then phoned Yoshimura in the evening to tell him that he’d caught a cold.

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

“Good morning,” Ryotaro said, trying to avoid eye contact with the man. His heart was beating erratically, and he couldn’t catch his breath. Just seeing Yoshimura’s face was enough to make him hyperventilate.

“Don’t ‘Good morning’ me. Taking the day off because of a cold? Setting up has been a fucking nightmare thanks to you.” Yoshimura’s plan had been to make Ryotaro do the set up at the Grand Capital by himself.

“I’m really sorry,” Ryotaro said in a small voice.

“Shithead. A germ like you catching a cold? That’s a fucking joke. But it’s not like your being here’s gonna improve sales. When are you going to wake up to your uselessness and just quit? Taking the day off, indeed. You’d better be ready, if you don’t meet your quota at the exhibition today I’m going to have you writing apologies until you die.” Yoshimura clicked his tongue in frustration as he let loose on Ryotaro.

The exhibition, known as the *Yushokuten*, was hosted by major diamond companies and held a number of times each year. It was a venue for jewelry makers, distributors, and jewelers to offer their stock to society’s elite. Guests received special invitations from the sponsors to be treated to dinner and shows before getting the chance to purchase the latest accessories that were not yet commercially available. In preparation for this *Yushokuten*, Ryotaro’s store had crafted a showpiece ring studded with over 300 million yen worth of rubies and diamonds in an attempt to reel in new clients on top of their regulars.

Twenty tables were laid out across the space of the Grand Capital’s Vermilion Bird Lounge. Invitations had been extended to over two hundred elite guests. The entrances and exits had been fitted with metal detectors designed to react to the metal and special tags attached to the jewelry, and the place brimmed with security guards. The lounge shone brilliantly as lights installed in the numerous glass cases reflected off the jewelry. The grandeur of the space was elevated by nine-foot tall *ikebana* flower arrangements on both sides of the central stage. Between 3:00 and 5:30, the upper-crust guests were free to walk around

GRAY MEN

the displays, try items on, and make purchases. The system was designed so clients only had to sign purchase orders at the exhibition; actual payment would be made at a later date when the client visited the jeweler's store.

Ryotaro stood towards the back of the booth, taking in the bustle of the exhibition, while Yoshimura and Shinohara interacted with clients from their advantageous positions at the front.

People dressed in unbridled extravagance were all smiles as they chatted and browsed the diamonds on display. Given that the rest of the country was in the grips of a recession, this room was an *aberration*, Ryotaro mused. The elite few that had received invitations to the Vermillion Bird Lounge presided as life's winners. Money begat money and the rich got richer. That had become clear during his time at the jewelry store.

Ryotaro froze as he caught a glimpse of a familiar figure, the woman responsible for everything.

He watched as her flabby body rippled with every step—fat doubtlessly born from the choicest cuts of meat. The room was not hot, but even from his distance Ryotaro could make out the sweat glistening on her forehead, pasting her bangs flat. She resembled a swollen anaconda, her eyes wide open in excitement as she drank in the gems on display, her thick, heavily rouged lips oddly clammy like some animal's, the color in contrast to the strikingly white foundation plastered on her face. Ryotaro couldn't help but frown in disgust.

All of Ryotaro's problems had stemmed from a single mistake. His job had, at first, gone well. Ryotaro's easygoing manner, together with a talent for English, had made him popular with the store's clients. He had been a valued member of the team. A number of clients came to ask for him directly and his sales were among the highest of his colleagues. Even the manager, Yoshimura, had liked him.

There was one customer who was very good for business. A middle-aged woman, her body flabby from expensive food, who lavished herself with expensive jewelry. She would visit the store a couple of times each month, and each time she would buy

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

more than the last trip. She was virtually a tree that bore money.

Rumor had it that after the death of her husband she had inherited land that had been in the family for generations. Able to live off the unearned income it generated, her fortune apparently just kept growing. Yoshimura, desperate for her business, was fervent in his attempts to ingratiate himself. Ryotaro, for his part, was careful not to offend her.

She took a liking to Ryotaro until, eventually, he came to be her exclusive attendant. Sometime after her total purchases were over a hundred million yen, she invited him to dinner. Ryotaro already had his suspicions of what would happen after that. He consulted Yoshimura and was told, in no uncertain terms, that he had to accept. Despite his total lack of enthusiasm, Ryotaro felt that he had no choice.

As expected, the venue was a restaurant in a glamorous hotel. After dinner they had drinks at the hotel bar until they were slightly drunk, then checked into the hotel's most expensive room. Ryotaro had resigned himself to grin and bear it, since it was only one night. But when the time came he found himself shaking uncontrollably. Before he realized it he had fled the room, overwhelmed with disgust for the woman and disbelief in himself. As he made his way home, still flustered, he fully considered himself to have made the right choice.

The next day, the woman filed a formal complaint with the store. She singled Ryotaro out and swore she would never set foot in such a "despicable" store again. When Yoshimura got wind of the news he flew into a rage. The woman had a number of connections and knew many of the store's other regular clients. The result was that sales crashed. Yoshimura's name was added to the list of prime candidates for redundancy as he came under increasing pressure from headquarters.

From that point onwards Yoshimura's attitude, along with those of his other colleagues, completely changed. Yoshimura was the worst—he would begin shouting for no reason and throw personal insults at Ryotaro.

Useless scum. You're a pain in the ass. Fucking quit. Asshole.

GRAY MEN

Garbage. Die.

Ryotaro's other colleagues joined in with the insults, as though following suit. Out of all of them, Shinohara seemed to enjoy it the most. In the midst of Yoshimura's relentless bullying, Ryotaro began to make mistakes on the job. Each time, the chain of insults worsened. Eventually, Ryotaro began to exhibit symptoms of depression. The attacks had continued for the last six months.

Ryotaro began to walk away from the booth, trying to avoid the woman as she approached.

"Where do you think you're going?" Yoshimura said, glaring at him as he grabbed Ryotaro's shoulder. Yoshimura tightened his hold, and the man's fingers dug into his flesh. "You haven't helped anyone yet, right? Are you planning to do any work?" His voice was low, so no one would overhear, but his eyes were full of menace. Ryotaro felt completely cowed. "Don't think you can leave here before meeting your quota. If you try, I'll run you down. I won't stop until I convince you that *another option that's not living would be the lesser evil for you.*" Yoshimura pushed Ryotaro's shoulder away.

Ryotaro couldn't stop trembling. He stood rooted to the spot, completely frozen.

5:30 p.m.

The clients sat at big round tables, enjoying the lavish banquet that was served. The exhibiting stores footed the bill for the food and drinks. Each dish was an elaborately presented plate of fusion cuisine. As they devoured the food, the clients discussed the gems on display.

In terms of quantity, there were relatively few items on display in the Vermilion Bird Lounge, but each was of the highest quality—the total value of the exhibition was close to ten billion yen. Moreover, each piece on offer was newly designed and not yet available in stores, which provided an endless source of conversation for the clientele.

Shortly after the last dish was served, the doors were shut

TOMOTAKE ISHIKAWA

and the show began. A female MC greeted the audience before welcoming onto the stage a well-known female jazz vocalist often seen on TV. The crowd burst into applause. The lights dimmed and the performance began. The woman's sultry voice melded with the piano's melody, weaving an atmosphere of calm through the hall. It was seven once the half-hour performance ended.

A different female MC, wearing a school uniform for some reason, her face obscured by a hunting cap, came on stage, said a few appreciative words, then called out in a lively voice, "For the next part of our show I am pleased to announce tonight's utterly amazing surprise guest!"

Sated by their dinner, the guests all turned to the stage.

"Who could it be? Let's welcome him!"

The lights dimmed, filling the room with silent darkness. A spotlight fell on the stage to reveal a tall man in a gray hat. Everything he wore was gray. A quarter of the guests cocked their heads sideways, not sure what was happening. Another quarter took a loud intake of breath—remembering *the incidents*—but, deciding it was a prank, soon broke into applause. The final half scowled, thinking it was a bad joke.

"Greetings, blessed individuals! How are you today?"

The gray man smiled. His face was hidden under the rim of his hat, and only his mouth was visible.

"It is my honor to make your acquaintances, you who use your wealth to exploit others, you who plaster your bodies with money. I ask you please to bear with me for the short duration of my show."

The gray man bowed, cuing for the lights came back on. Radiance flooded across the room, revealing ten or so people in black ski masks positioned around the edges. They were concentrated near the exits and held guns.

"I have a few requests. First, no matter what, do not raise your voices, and please stay where you are."

The gray man swept a burning gaze over the crowd before lifting up a hand. In response, the unidentified people along the walls began to smash the glass showcases and offload the gems

GRAY MEN

into bags.

All muttering ceased instantly. There were a few screams, but the majority remained silent, in accordance with the gray man's demand. Most were frozen with terror, unable to make a sound.

The people in ski masks packed the jewelry away with efficiency. The small quantity of the items on display allowed them to complete their work in the blink of an eye.

"And now for my next request. Please remove all jewelry you are wearing and place them at the center of your tables."

The guests sat still, seemingly unable to respond immediately to the demand.

The man in gray sighed. "I would prefer it if I did not have to repeat myself," he said, pointing off stage.

All eyes followed. They saw a man, held at either side by two masked individuals. Ryotaro's eyes opened wide. It was Yoshimura.

"You wouldn't want to leave with a nasty aftertaste, would you?"

One of the men pulled out a gun and leveled it at Yoshimura's temple. The guests hurriedly tore off their jewelry, throwing the gems onto the tables before them.

The gray man nodded with satisfaction. The masked men circled the tables, retrieving the jewels. Ryotaro spied the woman who had tried to force him into bed. He could see the flab under her chin trembling as she quaked with terror.

Yoshimura was released when the masked men finished gathering up the jewelry. Suddenly free from their grasp, he crumpled to the ground and wet himself. For the briefest of moments the man in gray—who had been focused on overseeing the operation—turned to meet Ryotaro's gaze and narrowed his eyes. In the next moment he turned back to the crowd and tipped the rim of his hat with his fingers.

"I thank you for your cooperation. My final request is that you close your eyes. You have seen nothing. Heard nothing. You shall inquire into nothing. If, that is, you value your lives."

The gray man's words caused the audience to shudder all the more. They squeezed their eyes tightly closed.