

Chapter 4: Fantasy Wine

"What the hell are you doing, Ryotaro? Didn't you say you were going to be Kensuke Aoto's secretary? But now you're working part-time at a wine merchant, why?"

"If you're going to ask what I'm doing, you're here every day drinking wine too, Hana."

"This is surveillance. I'm here to keep an eye on you. Who knows if that turtle will do anything if I leave you alone in a place with alcohol?"

"He doesn't show up where there's no women, does he?"

"Are you saying I'm not a woman? Huh? You're not Ryotaro. It's Momo? I'm drinking with Momo? Yikes...that's disgusting!"

"Oh, Hana, are you feeling sick? Is it because you're already drunk?"

"I can't possibly get drunk on just a little bit of this, can I?"

Hana shouted incoherently at the top of her lungs as she downed the shochu in one gulp, which was cheered and applauded by the customers in the room.

I'm the one who's disgusted...

Why was it that those two always turned a deaf ear to my weak voice? A week had passed since the day I started working part-time at Kitaura's store. It was a historic wine merchant with a storefront stacked with barrels that had now become rare. In one corner of the store, there was a space where you could have a drink, and customers were eating the canned food, pickles and dried fish that the store was selling while they drank there. Although the clientele there was completely different from the Milk Dipper, the familiar customers there were easy to get along with. Kitaura, the owner, was always away from the store, and one of the regulars had been helping to look after the store on a part-time basis. It was indeed necessary to hire part-time workers. At first I was earnestly attending to my regulars or delivering goods to customers in the neighborhood, but once, just as I was gasping for breath and carrying heavy cases of beer, Kintaros' cry of "Want to switch to me?" sounded. I said yes, and my nightmare began. "You're pretty strong," "You hired the right guy for a part-time job," and so on. With the appreciative voices of my regulars, I became their drinking companion, and later on, Hana was added to the list. As a result, since the day before yesterday, it seemed that my main job had become the role of heating up the atmosphere in the store. And it had to be a big drink in the middle of the day. Although the one drinking was Kintaros, it was also my body, as well as a body shared with the other Imagin. If the body got drunk from alcohol, it was the same for all of us.

You're obviously targeting Kensuke Aoto, right? Is this what they call "fishing for the big fish"? Hic!

You're still talking about catching fish? It's time to get rid of that dog first, right? Hic!

Momotaros, you're so stupid...What Kame-Chan is trying to say is that he likes fish a lot. As for me, I love fish, puppies and dogs. Hic!

"Any kind of fish is good, isn't it? I mean, all the fish here have become small side dishes for drinking. Hic!"

It was no longer a conversation. Besides, it was only evening.

"Oh, if it isn't Yuma? You're back!"

Kintaros said towards the entrance of the store. It was Yuma. Yuma was the only son of this store, and the grandson of Kitaura. Without a word, Yuma casted a contemptuous glance at the drunken rest of us and stamped up the stairs.

"When you hear, 'you're back', just say 'I'm back!' Hic!"

Kintaros said in a loud, unrelenting voice. It became a custom for the customers to say, "Let it go, let it go," to comfort me. I heard that Yuma's personality was so out of the way that he didn't think much of the customers, but rather he was always giving out the light of "This store is a pain in the ass". I had been stung by his stares when my part-time job had just begun, but I was getting used to it now. However...That day was different from usual. Once again, the sound of stomping on the stairs resounded, and Yuma, who had put his book bag down, reappeared at the store.

"What's wrong? Don't you want to say 'I'm back'?"

"Give me the drink."

Yuma held out his hand.

"Don't say anything stupid, you're underage, aren't you?"

"This is my family's wine."

"It's not your wine. It's from this store. The youngster of a wine merchant owner wants to get his hands on the store's merchandise?"

"So what if it's a commodity?"

Before I could finish my sentence, Yuma had already reached out and picked up the glass in front of me and drank the wine with it, and it was too late to stop him...Just as I was thinking that, Yuma immediately coughed, and spat out all the wine in his mouth. Even if you talked tough, kids would always be kids.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

Hana patted Yuma's back while glaring at me with a reproachful look, but Kintaros acted as if nothing had happened and spoke.

"Who told you to drink when you're obviously a kid."

"...What kind of wine is this?"

Yuma asked as he coughed.

"Shochu. Shochu boiled in water. Or rather, water that's been boiled in shochu."

"Is it different from sake?"

"It's different."

"Huh."

A contemptuous sneer appeared on Yuma's face. He flicked Hana's hand away before stomping up the stairs once again.

"So that's how it is..."

Kintaros eyed Yuma's figure and uttered a plausible sentiment.

"What was that?"

"That's the way it is. That's just how much you drink and how drunk you can get!"

Kintaros refilled the cup with boiling water and gulped it down in one gulp.

"That's just it, Kintaros seems to have gotten hold of something about Yuma, but he hasn't told me anything."

"Hmm."

"Do you have anything on your side?"

"No, nothing special."

The next morning, Yuto and I made regular contact by phone, though Yuto's response was rather cold. Yuto continued to follow Aoto, while I worked at Kitaura's store every day. It had been a while since either of us showed up at the Milk Dipper. For Yuto, it would be a problem if his face was exposed in front of Aoto, while I didn't want to meet Kitaura at the Milk Dipper. Although Kitaura attentively patronized the Milk Dipper every day, it seemed that he never noticed my existence or knew that I'm my sister's younger brother, but that was rather just fine now. On the other hand, I didn't want my sister to know that I worked part-time for Kitaura. I didn't know how to answer if she asked me why. I had my own difficulties, too...Neither I, nor Yuto, would be able to get close to the Milk Dipper for a while. The rendezvous point that had been in place was no longer available, so we were reduced to contacting each other by phone.

"More than that, Nogami, didn't anything strange happen on your side? How about something subtle? Like that spider silk a while ago, is there anything like that?"

"Strange as it may seem, once Hana, when she was drunk, lifted a keg as if it were a weightlifting barbell..."

"No, not one of those."

"If it's not that, then what..."

Yuto hung up the phone without letting me finish. Even then, Hana was still upset that I came to work part-time for Kitaura after many twists and turns, but Yuto didn't seem to care about it. On the contrary, he asked me about the smallest things that I wouldn't pay attention to. For example, the spider silk that I saw in Aoto's office. What exactly did Yuto care about? I cocked my head as I pedaled to work at Kitaura's store. We were halfway through April, and the welcome breeze of early spring was refreshing. I rode my bicycle through the shopping street, remembering the model of the street I had seen at Aoto's place a while ago. The soba noodle store, the pancake store, the old bookstore, soon everything would be high-rise buildings. Of course the Milk Dipper, and Kitaura's store too. It all still didn't feel very real as I thought about it.

Ryotaro...Set up a trap today and see what happens.

Huh? What did you say, Kintaros?

I didn't say anything.

Silence fell upon Kintaros. It seemed to be a cold day for everyone. When I arrived at the store, Kitaura was on his way out. Kitaura took one look at my face and handed over the store to me,

and then he went out to who knew where. By mid-afternoon, as usual, Hana had come to meet at the store as well. However, this time...

"I looked into it."

"What did you investigate...?"

"The matter of Yuma, to be exact. Or rather, Lord Mayu."

"Lord?"

Ryotaro, you work here and you've never taken a good look at these products?

Hana put her hands to her hips with surprise, then led me to the storefront. "Lord Mayu". There it indeed was. The kegs stacked at the storefront had that name written on them. I wasn't making excuses, it was just that, I couldn't help it if I couldn't remember that. Even if those casks were in the storefront, though, this wine, called Lord Mayu, was never sold as a commodity. I thought those casks were just for decoration. After I told that to Hana, she sighed.

"I always thought that Yuma's name was a bit similar to this one, so I thought there should be some reason for this, so I tried to investigate about "Lord Mayu". Then..."

This was the information Hana had received. Yuma was originally a sake produced in Kyushu, but the brewery that produced it moved to Tokyo after the war. That was the husband's family, the mother of Kitaura's son, Yuma. Only, it was no longer possible to recreate this wine. Because its wine collection had closed. It had become the Fantasy Wine.

"I heard that Yuma's parents had already died when he was a child, and as a result he was adopted by his grandfather, Kitaura. However, people say that Yuma's parents didn't entrust Yuma with the wish of bringing back Lord Mayu to life, and that's why Yuma's parents named their son Yuma in reference to Lord Mayu."

"Everyone was talking about...who?"

"Of course, I'm a familiar face around here."

In that case, it seemed that Hana hadn't come here just to get drunk, but she was actually there to get acquainted with everyone in order to gather information.

"This wish to revive the Fantasy Wine, did Yuma's parents entrust it to Yuma?"

"But it seems Kitaura didn't mean it. Kitaura put the barrels of Lord Mayu in the store as decoration, but what he was selling wasn't even sake, and didn't he just leave all the work of looking after the store to Ryotaro, and run off somewhere on his own? I guess he doesn't care

about his job at all. And he'll be able to get a good amount of money by taking advantage of the reconstruction."

"I don't think Kitaura is that kind of person..."

Although I objected to Hana's words, I was, in fact, not very confident about it, even though I objected. I came to work at this store through Aoto or Tsunozaki, but I hadn't talked much with Kitaura. I didn't think I would have had much of a chance to meet Kitaura, but I couldn't help it, there was nothing I could do about it. I also thought that Kitaura was a bit irresponsible when I thought of him as a grandparent who lived together with his grandson. Before I came to work as a part-timer, Kitaura used to leave the store to his regular customers at dusk and then run off by himself. And after I came, it wasn't just after dusk that Kitaura was absent; now he was gone from early in the morning. A man who didn't take care of his own store or looked after his grandchildren, I thought about how he could care about his daughter's family's sake.

"Even though they say they want to resurrect Lord Mayu, can this really be done?"

"I don't know. But I guess Yuma must want to fulfill that wish."

Maybe that could actually be true, and that's what I was thinking. The depression caused by the seemingly unattainable wish. Perhaps that's why Yuma vented his frustration on the store and its customers.

This is what it looks like...

Kintaros whispered. But when I asked him what he meant, he never answered further.

Towards evening, Yuma returned. As usual he didn't look over at us, just headed straight up the stairs. Initially I thought Kintaros would do something at this point, but Kintaros didn't react. It turned out that Kintaros' so-called "trap" was after nightfall, when Kitaura returned.

"Nogami, you're off duty."

"You can't do that, that's not allowed."

"Huh?"

"Why don't you have a drink, too?"

Kintaros took Kitaura's hand in a strong grip and told him to sit at the counter. I poured wine into the glass with great vigor. The guests have long been accustomed to Kintaros' hospitality, but Kitaura, who had only seen me in my usual form so far, was now completely dumbfounded.

"What kind of wine is Lord Mayu?"

Kintaros opened the conversation.

"‘Lord Mayu’? That kind of wine...It’s just not a very good kind of wine yet."

"Don't you want to bring it back?"

"It's no use bringing it back to life, it's just a bad wine."

"That’s up to you to decide!"

Kintaros pointed at Kitaura.

"It's up to me to decide what kind of wine it is. Is there much left?"

"No, there isn't. It doesn't exist anywhere. This kind of wine stopped being produced a long time ago. None of you have ever drunk it."

Kitaura said as he looked around the faces of his regulars. They all nodded their heads immediately.

"Yes."

Kintaros stood up unperturbed and shouted.

"Yuma! Yuma! Come on down! Drink up the Lord Mayu!"

"Nogami, what are you doing..."

Kitaura was confused by this. Wondering what was going on, Yuma peered over the stairs. Seeing this, Kintaros walked over to the storefront and carried the keg over.

"Where else would it be? Well, it's here now, it exists right here!"

Kintaros ripped the rope off with his bare hands and cracked the lid with a hand knife. It opened. With very rough handling, though. Kintaros scooped the wine directly from the cask with a glass.

"This is Lord Mayu!"

Kintaros downed the entire glass in one gulp. Suddenly...The wine in his mouth was sprayed out.

"This is awful!"

I could feel the flavor too. It was more like vinegar than wine. It felt like a very weird tasting vinegar diluted and then made weirdly sweet. It couldn't be called a good drink in any way.

"Of course."

Hana, who was watching all this while worrying, chimed in.

"Sake that's been lying around all the time can't be good."

"That's right..."

Kintaros was very disappointed. It was as if I understood what kind of plot Kintaros had originally planned. This would've been the time to say "delicious!". The plot was that Kitaura and everyone else was reacquainted with the deliciousness of Lord Mayu, which made Kitaura want to resurrect Lord Mayu in a single breath. Kitaura got his passion for his work back from then on, and Yuma smiled. As long as things went like that... That's likely what Kintaros thought. However, things were not going as planned. The Fantasy Wine "Lord Mayu" didn't work anymore.

"No matter how famous the wine is, it will become unpalatable when it gets old."

"That's not it..."

By the time I noticed, Kitaura had already picked up the cup holding the wine, and took a sip to test.

"This is indeed Lord Mayu. It's not because it's gotten old, it's just the way it is. It has no character and is meaninglessly sweet, and that's what it is. It is not a fine wine, even if we are being polite. It's not a rice-producing region, so it's not like it's a good idea. It sort of sold well for a while after the war, but it was completely discarded when customers could buy better sake. I keep the casks in the store and sometimes I get customers who say it's nostalgic, but I've never had a customer say, 'I'd like to drink it again. It's just the way it is as a wine.'"

"Then, if we say we're going to resurrect Lord Mayu, we could do it."

"This wine? Do you want to drink it again?"

"Umm...But doesn't giving Yuma the name 'Yuma' mean that you hope that one day Lord Mayu will be resurrected?"

"Quite the opposite. My daughter and her husband named 'Mayu' in reverse, which means to not make this kind of wine again, to not repeat this kind of foolishness, and my daughter and her husband are in this spirit of wishing."

Hearing those surprising words from Kitaura, Kintaros couldn't even say anything.

"Whether it's Yuma or Lord Mayu, don't worry about it. I don't intend for Yuma to inherit this brewery, nor do I intend for him to make sake. Let Yuma go his own way. That was the wish of my dead daughter and her husband. I guess Yuma feels the same way. If no one else is going to inherit it, it would be nice to see this kind of store disappear. Isn't that right, Yuma?"

Including the familiar guests present, everyone's eyes were focused on Yuma. With everyone waiting, Yuma nodded slowly.

"Yeah. I hate this kind of store. Whether it's booze or drunks, it's annoying!"

"..."

The store was dead silent. Kintaros didn't make a sound either.

This is boring.

Momotaros stretched, breaking the silence only inside my head.

I was thinking that Kumako's drama is back, and this is how it ends? What kind of ending is this?

But then again, maybe Kin-Chan got credit for it this time. We've finally found proof of whether or not Kitaura really wants to close down the store. As soon as we report this to Kensuke Aoto, won't the real mission of this part-time job be over? Even though it's a thick layer of salt on the family's wounds.

Don't bully Kuma-Chan! Why don't I apologize for you, Kuma-Chan?

That guy's assed should be wiped by that guy himself...Huh? Is Kumako asleep?

The scene is too cold. Is he hibernating?

Hey! Wake up! Hey!

"..."

Even when spoken to by them, Kintaros did not respond. I didn't think there's any way he could have actually fallen asleep, it was likely just that the shock was too much.

"Yuma, wait."

I switched the control of my body back to myself and called out to Yuma who was trying to return to his room from the stairs.

"Let's try drinking Lord Mayu, too."

"I don't want it."

Yuma showed a scoffing face.

"Who would want to drink such a bad wine?"

"It was Kintaros who found it hard to drink...No, I'm just saying that. You haven't had it yet. Whether it's hard to drink or not, that's something you'll have to decide for yourself."

I scooped up a cup of Lord Mayu and handed it to Yuma.

Ryotaro, this...this kind of stale wine, anyone who drinks it will find it hard to drink. And letting an underage person drink it...

Kintaros weakly resisted me.

"Shut up! Hana too!"

"...Didn't I not say anything yet?"

"I don't need you to tell me, I know what you're trying to say. But Yuma can't stop drinking this now. You don't have to be underage, you can do whatever you want. If we wait for Yuma to become an adult, by then this store might be gone, and all the kegs might be thrown away. Maybe this is the last remaining Lord Mayu. If you don't drink it now, you might not get another chance in your life."

I continued to hand the glass straight to Yuma. Yuma didn't take his eyes off of it. As long as Yuma continued to not look over, I wouldn't take my eyes off him either.

"It's up to you to decide. Whether Lord Mayu is good to drink, or whether it is hard to drink."

"..."

Yuma came down the stairs without a word, then, looking timid, took a sip from the cup. His expression changed.

"It's so hard to drink."

"It tastes bad."

I laughed out loud.

"What are you trying to do to my grandson?"

Kitaura was really full of displeasure.

"This is fine. Even if it's hard to drink, it's okay. Because this is the main Yuma. Yuma can't remember it without using his own sense of taste."

"I'll remember that."

Yuma smiled.

"I don't want to drink that kind of stuff, even if I die, that's why they named it after me instead. Dad and mom really hate this kind of bar."

"Yuma, this isn't right."

I shook my head.

"If your mom and dad hated this wine, they wouldn't have named their kid after it."

"What's that?"

"They really do want to resurrect Lord Mayu."

"This awful stuff?"

"It's because it's hard to drink, and tastes bad. That's why the name was reversed."

"What?"

"As Kitaura said, if this sake is to remain as it is, it won't work. However, whether you want to reverse the hard-to-drink Lord Mayu and resurrect it as a good drink, or whether you want to put a lid on Lord Mayu's history and let it come to an end, it's all up to you, Yuma. I think that's what the name Yuma means."

"...Why would you know that?"

"I know. Because the name itself is the best gift a parent can give a child."

That's the only thing I could say with confidence.

"My name is Ryotaro. It's a very old name, isn't it? I've been bullied since I was a kid because of my name, and I've had bad luck. However, I've met some great people, and I think I've had a really good life. I think I owe it all to my parents for giving me the name Ryotaro."

"But you were bullied, weren't you?"

"Yes, I've been bullied a lot."

I laughed, and so did Yuma. Yuma laughed while trying to send the glass to his mouth. I stopped him in a panic.

"No, you can't drink underaged."

"You told me to drink it."

"That's true...Let's drink up the rest of the Lord Mayu. All open the kegs."

"Got it."

Yuma honestly gave me back the cup. He then spoke.

"I'm glad you guys are able to drink such bad wine. One day, I will make an even better tasting Lord Mayu to show you!"

Cheers echoed through the store.

I was shaken awake by Hana.

"Ryotaro. It's time to go back, Ryotaro."

"Really...I can't believe you're drunk like this."

I heard Yuto's voice overflowing with annoyance. It seemed that I got drunk and fell asleep without realizing it.

"Uhh...Where is everybody?"

"They all left a long time ago."

There were no more customers in the store, and only Kitaura was left leaning on the counter. Speaking of which, just now, while drinking the Lord Mayu, I seemed to have had a lot of conversations with Kitaura. Kitaura said all kinds of heartfelt things, and I told him all kinds of things.

"I'm a spy for Aoto."

"I know."

"Is there anything you're hiding from Aoto?"

"No..." Kitaura laughed.

"When Aoto introduced you to me, I was on the alert because I thought it was something like that, but well, you've really made a fool out of me! Now, Yuma is fully committed to the path of sake brewing. That was once my daughter's ambition, but then she gave it up, then died. It's a rough road, and I don't want Yuma to go down that same road..."

"But that's for Yuma to decide. Not that we have to decide now, but it's okay to decide after a few more years. It's just that I have to give him that choice now."

"It's true, but what about..."

I remember our conversation going in circles, with both Kitaura and I repeating the same words over and over again. Then I seemed to fall asleep just like that.

"Yuto, before me, you take Kitaura..."

"I know. Seems like that's why I was called out."

Yuto sighed in extreme disgust before letting Kitaura hold his shoulders as he walked up the stairs.

"Okay, let's go home, Nogami."

At some point I was assisted by Yuto. He was clearly still on the stairs just now...I wasn't sure if it was because Yuto could move so quickly, or if I just blanked out my consciousness for a moment.

"Why are you drinking like this again? It's obvious you're not much of a drinker."

In a haze, I heard the voices of Yuto and Hana conversing from the distance of my consciousness.

"But Ryotaro was so handsome just now. The name itself is the best gift a parent can give a child."

"What? A gift? How much of a romanticizer is he..."

"Ryotaro's a male. Isn't that what you should do, no matter where you go?"

"I wish he'd grow up faster."

I was helped out of the tavern by Yuto, and set off on my way home with floating feet. It seemed that the night had passed without me realizing it, and there were a few pedestrians on the streets in the early morning. The shopping street returned to calm. The calmer the surroundings became, the louder the voice of the Imagin felt.

The name is the best gift, yet...Hic! What kind of gift is that? I was given the weird name 'Urataros'. It's not a gift, it's a curse. Hic! It's not too late to change my name to something cooler that matches me, something handsome. Hic!

"Urataros" is too much. I can just call you "turtle". Hic!

How dare you! It's just a waste of my time to call Senpai "Momotaros". He's just an oni whose brain is only a muscle. Hic!

Hey! What the hell are you talking about? Hic!

Just when I thought Momotaros would jump Urataros, Momotaros suddenly turned towards me.

Hey, Ryotaro...Hic!

Momotaros' voice was uncharacteristically wimpy, and maybe a bit more meaner than usual.

I think I smelled the odor of an Imagin just now. But I'm drunk, so I'm not sure what it is. Hic!

Really? Where?

I told you I'm too drunk to tell you. Hi!. By the way, when you said "I met a good companion", what did you mean by that...?

That's when my consciousness slipped back into chaos.

It was a bright morning, on a Saturday. Just as I arrived at the door of the tavern with my head stinging and ready to start work, Tsunozaki, Aoto's secretary, called.

"Is it time to find something out?"

"I think Kitaura should have put Yuma first."

I told Tsunozaki roughly what I had seen and heard at Kitaura's store between those ten days. It was mainly centered on yesterday's events.

"I've heard that if Kitaura grants his grandson education funds now, he would be exempt from taxes. But it seems that this tax arrangement is only until the end of the year...If Aoto is planning to acquire his own store and land, Kitaura seems to want it to happen as soon as possible. I think that's why Kitaura will be actively pushing for the expansion of the redevelopment plan."

"I see."

Tsunozaki said this on the other end of the line, and then I thought I heard someone beside Tsunozaki say something insightful in a hurry. After listening, Tsunozaki gave me categorical instructions.

"I understand. Nogami, you can resign today."

"Huh? You can resign?"

"It looks like the official report can wait until early next week. I'll be in touch."

"Tsunozaki, please wait..."

Without waiting for me to finish, Tsunozaki had already hung up the phone. It was cold outside. It had been clear for a while lately that one would think spring was on its way, but then it suddenly became as cold and windy as if we'd fallen back into winter, starting yesterday evening. It was just that the content of the conversation just now was even more chilling. On the other end of the line was Tsunozaki and another person. It was probably Aoto. Maybe he was listening through the phone's loudspeaker. Why was I free from my part-time job at the wine merchant today? What did Aoto "understand" after hearing my report? Could I have said something I shouldn't have said?

"Who were you talking to on the phone?"

I looked up with trepidation, and standing over there was Yuma, who was wearing a school uniform, and was very upset. He was about to leave to go to Saturday's class.

"Who it was...Well..."

"You're a spy for Aoto, aren't you?"

Yesterday, Yuma and I clearly had a mutual understanding, but this morning's Yuma was as cold and icy as if the weather had gone completely backwards today.

"What have you told that miser? Is it possible to lower the price of buying this store because the Lord Mayu is hard to drink?"

"Yuma, I didn't..."

"Aoto's dog!"

Throwing down those words, Yuma turned and ran away. Aoto's dog. The words Yuma left behind floated around me for a long time. To dispel the floating air, I picked up the phone.

"Yuto, where are you now?"

"In front of Aoto's house. The secretary just went inside, so I guess Aoto will stay home and work today?"

"Where is that!?"

I rode my bike at full speed. Aoto's home wasn't that far away. Aoto's barbershop was also located nearby, which felt natural. For Aoto, this redevelopment was also an attempt to revitalize the city he lived in. The distance itself wasn't far though, it was just a shame that I kept getting lost. Finally I arrived at the address that Yuto had told me about, and by the time I saw Yuto's face, I was dying of exhaustion.

"Didn't I tell you that smartphones can do navigation? Remember how to use it properly."

"...Is this Aoto's...?"

It wasn't really a big house, like a mansion. It was just a single house in a very ordinary, residential neighborhood. The garden behind the house was also very small. The office building was obviously so grand that I felt oppressed, but I couldn't imagine that a president who owned such a building would have a home that was so uncharacteristically ordinary. To be more honest, when I heard the rumor that demon dogs haunted the rich, I imagined that the home of the rich Aoto, even if it wasn't comparable to the manor in "The Hound of the Baskervilles," must've been as grand as the mansions in the movies. That kind of fantasy seemed to be just my childish romanticism...Yuto threw me a look, as if to ask me what was wrong, and I just walked past him and rang the doorbell.

I was still catching my breath as I was led to the parlor.

"What can I do for you? I'm a busy man."

Aoto said sharply. Obviously in his own home, Aoto was still wearing that ill-fitting suit. Working at home, it seems that Yuto's opinion wasn't wrong.

"What do you mean by telling me to quit my job with Kitaura?"

"Don't worry. I'll have another job for you."

"That's not what I meant. What I'm trying to say is that if I resign, Kitaura will be troubled..."

"It doesn't matter if it bothers Kitaura, because you're working for me."

"What exactly did you send me to Kitaura for? What exactly did you understand after listening to my report just now?"

"You ask too many questions."

Aoto sighed.

"What about the demon dog, what about the monsters, you're always asking questions."

"Please answer me!"

"...This room is cold."

Aoto gestured to Tsunozaki, who was standing by, to start the heater. When I thought that Aoto didn't mean to answer me, he then looked back at me and raised one finger.

"I understand a few things from your report. The first is the reason Kitaura wants cash so badly. It was because he has to pay for the education of his grandson, who is still a middle school student. It's really important information. That's the first point."

Aoto held up a second finger.

"The other thing is that the grandson is determined to revive that Fantasy Wine. That's something we have to watch out for. As long as I know these two points, that's enough information for me."

"Enough...?"

I still didn't get it at all.

"This is information, and that is information... Is what I just said of any use to Aoto?"

"Very useful. It's this kind of information that's most important. For example, I learned that there was nothing suspicious behind Kitaura's active promotion of the reconstruction. Though, it was because he wanted to make the deal happen before the deadline. In other words, if I delayed as much as possible during the negotiations, it would be to my advantage. As long as I make him feel more or less anxious, he won't be able to put up any reasonable strings attached to the deal."

"...So what about Yuma's take on the wine?"

"That's where the problem lies. It would have been best if Kitaura had decided to run the brewery until his own generation. But now that this has gone wrong, I'm worried if Kitaura wants his grandson to inherit the store. He might have an unwarranted desire to continue the business facility. I've been planning to make a large chain of liquor stores move into the new facility for a long time, but Kitaura's situation is incompatible with my plans."

Aoto crossed his arms over his chest and began to think.

"If it's an interest in making wine, then I can feel free to recommend that grandson for admission to an agricultural college, or pretend to promise to make that resurrected wine available in a national chain of stores. I have to make sure the deal goes well. All in all, it's about making sure that he doesn't get obsessed with continuing to run his current store."

Aoto seemed satisfied. But I wasn't.

"Is what happened at Kitaura's bargaining chip for Aoto?"

"That's right."

"The Lord Mayu is the wine of Yuma's father and mother. He hoped that he could revive Lord Mayu. Kitaura wanted to sell the important store and land to you, Aoto, also for the sake of Yuma. I'm telling you all this in the hope that you will understand these things."

"I'm listening to understand these things. You're doing a good job. That is, Kitaura has a weakness. Mastering the weaknesses of your negotiating opponent is the basics."

"..."

I felt speechless. Aoto didn't pay any attention to me, and just looked back at Tsunozaki.

"It's not getting any warmer, is it?"

"Maybe the heater is malfunctioning."

Tsunozaki squatted down in front of the heater, huffed, and blew into it. There was some kind of powdery substance attached to the air outlet of the heater, and the air outlet was white. Tsunozaki flicked the powder with his hand and blew into it with his mouth while flicking the switch, but the powder, which was densely packed in the vent, did not move, and the heater could not be activated in any way.

"I'm going to the office."

Aoto stood up.

"President, I'm not supposed to stay at home all day today..."

"It's too cold in here."

Aoto finished his sentence and took off. Tsunozaki rushed to catch up with him, but then Aoto gave him instructions to bring Jade, and Tsunozaki turned back to Jade. I had a moment of hesitation. The heater looked really concerning. The machine itself looked new, not like it had become old due to years of use, so the fact that the heater in front of us seemed to be blowing out powder all over the place was really an incongruous sight.

"Don't miss the smallest things."

I heard Yuto say. I've heard him say that before. However, after being a moment late, I chased after Aoto. Because I had finally found what I needed to say. Grabbing Aoto, who was already standing in front of the garage door, I squeezed the words out.

"...I refuse."

"Refuse? Refuse what?"

"I'm refusing the next job you're giving me."

"Is the servant trying to break his promise with me?"

Aoto said, but he didn't look surprised. I took a deep breath of the cold outdoor air and then continued.

"A while back, I asked a friend to investigate binary options. There is a trick to it. It was the 10th day of the month, the day where the five or ten day average of the dollar against the yen is

announced. Before ten o'clock on that day, the dollar would rise, and after ten o'clock, the dollar would fall."

"Maybe there is such a tendency, but it is just a tendency, and it happens to be Friday."

"However, if you said 'up or down' on that day, it is easy for a layman to answer "up" if you see through it. It doesn't matter whether it's actually going up or down. If the dollar goes up, the yen goes down, if the dollar goes down, the yen goes up, whether it's up in terms of the dollar or down in terms of the yen. You deliberately asked Momotaros, no, me, whether the dollar would rise or fall, so that I would give you the answer 'rise'."

You're so despicable!

I heard Momotaros cursing.

"That's what negotiation skills are all about."

Aoto said without hesitation.

"Are you like this with anyone?"

"I don't trust anyone."

"Yuma was right. You're a miser..."

"Scrooge. That's a nice way of putting it. Only money won't betray me."

"It's time to say goodbye."

I said.

"I can't work for you...I hate you."

"..."

Aoto didn't say anything. Then he exhaled a mouthful of white breath and spoke.

"Surely, you're going to betray me too?"

"..."

"There are still a lot of things I don't understand about you. Including how you know where my house is. Although it would have been interesting. But nevermind, let's say goodbye."

“ ... ”

Tsunozaki, who was putting Jade in a portable cage, was also there. The car that Aoto was riding in departed, and I watched him go in a daze. Because I was so confused, I didn't even notice that there was a teenager in a school uniform who was swooping out of the shadows. The teenager yelled as he pounded his fist on the car's backseat window.

“Aoto! I won't let a guy like you buy my store! You're a miser!”

It was Yuma. Why was Yuma here? Although my head was in a mess, I seemed to gradually understand. He followed me. Yuma saw me talking to Tsunozaki on the phone and sensed an unusual atmosphere from it, so he secretly followed me there. That couldn't be wrong. Then, he also heard the conversation between me and Aoto in front of the garage door...Aoto's car increased its speed and tried to leave, but Yuma ran to catch up. I ran too.

“Yuma, stop!”

Next...I really don't know what happened that time. When I felt a sudden moment of darkness, Yuma collapsed as if he had been hit by something. Aoto's car had just left.

“What was that!?”

Yuto, who was catching up from behind, said. I sprinted to Yuma. Although he had tripped and fell when something hit him, he didn't seem to be hurt, other than in big surprise.

“Yuto, was that...”

“That guy's huge. Who the heck is that?”

“Huge guy?”

“Don't you see?”

There's a huge guy jumping from that roof.

And he just took out that kid.

Then he jumped over there and disappeared.

It was so fast. Like magic!

“ ... ”

Even though we shared the same eyes, I seemed to be the only one who couldn't see anything.

“That guy!”

Yuto looked around quickly, before pointing to the spot where the “huge guy” had landed. The concrete ground had one clear new footprint. It was a dog track. It seemed to be the size of a ring, too big for a dog, but with one look, it was easy to tell it belonged to a dog.

“Is it the demon dog?”

Yuto spat out the words in a low voice.