



ikumo

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Ura ni wa ura ga aru.

The reverse side has its reverse side.

(Japanese proverb)

Ikumo, September 1989

I awoke at first light, as always when in Ikumo. The air was chill, with more than a hint of autumn in it. Nevertheless, I pushed the heavy quilt aside and shuffled on my knees across the scratchy *tatami* mats. Three shuffles to slide open the *shoji*, swing my legs down the high step to the bare wooden floor of the gallery and reach across to push the shutters wide open. The windows were unglazed, so I scuttled back to the warmth of the futon from where I had a clear view to the low, rounded hills in the west. They glowed faintly in the early light as delicate strands of violet mist rose from the rice paddies to converge and, eventually, obscure them. Once fully coalesced the fog would lift and break up again, re-exposing the gentle peaks. The newly formed clouds would drift off in a ragged line as if ordered to overshadow a particular corner of the country that day. No sooner were they gone than others arose, concealing, then revealing the hills once again and, in their turn, floating away.

“Ikumo,” I was told on my first visit, “means ‘birthplace of clouds’. Look to the west at dawn and you will see why.”

I never lost my original enchantment with this scene: it somehow made me feel on the verge of unveiling the mysteries of the East, even now when I knew that understanding was as fleeting as the view.

Tokyo, July 1989

Kinyoobi
(Friday)

I

Tramping through the steam bath that is Tokyo in the last days of the rainy season was no way to spend a lunch break. If the queue at the stand hadn't been so long, I would have grabbed a cab for the mile journey from my office to the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police Department - the *Keishicho*. As it was, I told myself that walking would give me time to screw up my courage for an encounter that only desperation could provoke. But in this atmosphere it was a mistake. I had barely gone fifty yards and was already soaked with perspiration. My best linen blouse was stuck to my skin in large, damp patches. I would arrive limp and dishevelled, not conducive to appearing business-like and in control.

The route didn't cheer me any either. Usually I could find something of interest in even the most unpromising of neighbourhoods: an unusual stone lantern, a miniature shrine laden with bizarre offerings - clove cigarettes or plum chewing gum, perhaps - or an incomprehensible sign that I could puzzle over for hours, only to learn that it was advertising fortune tellers or blind masseurs. But my path today was overshadowed by the *Shuto-kō*, Tokyo's mostly elevated expressway. The grimy, steel-reinforced concrete structure and the office blocks that stood on either side of it seemed to accentuate the bleakness of the few visible patches of sky. Overlaying the sickly sweet musk of the drains was a pervasive odour of rotting garbage from the piles of clear polythene bags stacked by some of the giant supports. A murder of very large, very black crows, a growing plague on the city, pecked at a heap opposite a *yakitori* restaurant, pulling chicken bones from the holes they created. They were not the least bit perturbed by my passage, watching with beady stares that made me shiver and walk a bit faster.

The expressway slipped underground and the road broadened into a tree-lined avenue, but I was so busy wallowing in discomfort that I scarcely noticed and found myself at the *Keishicho* without having worked out what I was going to say. I tried to think in the time it took me to find the main entrance, but I was distracted, somewhat mesmerized even, by the unwelcoming greyness of the seventeen storey building wedged between the equally grim Ministry of Home Affairs and the red brick, Meiji-era Ministry of Justice. Opposite was the moat of the Imperial Palace. Were it any other day I would have been drawn to its towering, pine-clad banks and ancient stone walls, but today I didn't even glance that way.

When I found the entrance I went straight in, before I could lose my nerve, give in to the little voice telling me this was a mistake, and turn back.

There was hardly any noticeable difference between the reception area and outside: it was just as hot and humid, just as colourless. A patrolman stationed at the door welcomed me with a salute and a surreptitious once over. Two young women in navy and white police uniforms sat at a reception desk looking irritatingly fresh. They greeted me in unison, bowing slightly from their elevated position. I responded promptly in Japanese so that they wouldn't worry about trying to speak English.

"I am very sorry to trouble you. My name is Knight. I would like to see *Keibu* Keiichi Shimizu of the Criminal Investigation Bureau." I bowed and offered my business card which told them that I was Ginevra C. Knight, Head of Research at Camelot Brokerage Limited, a British firm long established and well known in Japan.

They had a brief discussion concerning which Keiichi Shimizu I might mean, their eyes flicking from the card to me and back again, settling on the one who'd just moved from a division that often dealt with Tokyo's foreign population.

"Do you have an appointment with Shimizu *Keishi*?"

Suppressing a whisper of angst, I hesitated, wondering whether it was too late to retreat. But the words seemed to come of their own volition. "No, I'm afraid not. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I need to speak to him on an urgent matter. A police matter. He'll know who I am if you would be so kind as to call him."

I had phoned ahead to confirm his presence at headquarters, but there was no guarantee that he would be free, or even agree to see me. I stepped back from the desk while the call was being made and pretended to look around the lobby as I strained to glean the reply, both fearing and craving rejection.

Considering that it was the headquarters of the most important police force in Japan, it was remarkably quiet. The only feature of the white-tiled, cathedral height lobby seemed to be a small seating area set around a group of vending machines where two men with serious faces sat talking, one leaning forward with his arms crossed and head bobbing as he acknowledged the other's words. Both clutched flimsy paper cups from which they didn't drink.

The receptionist called me back. "Shimizu-*san* will see you," she said. "Please put this on and follow me."

I clipped the Visitor's Pass to my wilted blouse and followed her, our steps echoing through the empty hall. We saw no one else until an elevator disgorged us into a long corridor lined with open plan

offices, every one stuffed with rows of steel desks and filing cabinets, all overflowing with paper. Several uniformed women looked up as we passed, but the men kept their eyes on the paperwork. Just like any other Japanese workplace.

We turned into another dreary hallway with smaller offices, doors closed and blinds drawn. My escort stopped outside one of these. I entered with trepidation, but the room was empty. As she backed out, bowing and clutching my card, I fought the urge to follow her, tell her that it wasn't important after all. But it was.

The interview room, furnished only with a metal table bolted to the floor and four plastic chairs, was not designed to set visitors at ease. The wall opposite my seat was mirrored, but, aside from a small window in the door, there was no opening to the outside. The lighting was fluorescent and unkind. I pushed at my hair and patted the sweat from my face with a rough tissue from an advertising packet I'd been handed in the street, regretting that I hadn't brought a comb and some lip gloss. I plucked at my blouse to peel it away from my skin and adjusted my skirt so that my legs wouldn't stick to the chair. I tried to concentrate on my reason for being there, to ignore the tumult in my stomach, but my eyes kept going to the door and my thoughts to Kei coming through it.

Keiichi Shimizu, Police Inspector, Criminal Investigations Bureau. Keiichi Shimizu, tower of strength and passion, love of my life. Keiichi Shimizu, liar and cheat, traitor to love. I swore I would never see him again. But now I needed his help.

And then he was there. The door flew inwards and he stood in the entrance as if unsure of what he would find, glaring at me for several seconds before entering without speaking. Behind him was a woman constable whose uniform could only recently have been exchanged for that of a school girl. She bowed in my direction, but he just nodded and grunted something that might have been my name, causing her to cast him a bemused look. I shot to my feet, scraping my legs on the edge of the seat, and bowed deeply to hide the sudden flush that was burning my cheeks.

"I'm very sorry to trouble you, Shimizu-san. I know how busy you are," I said in English.

He grunted again, sat and indicated that I should do the same. Then he turned to the constable and asked her to bring tea. She left her pad and pen on the table and went out. Without taking his eyes off me, he reached towards the door and threw a switch on the wall. Stale, tepid air came out of a vent in the ceiling, but did little to ease the stifling climate in the room. Settling back in his seat, he finally spoke.

“Shibaraku desu ne, Gin-chan.” The familiar form of address surprised me. His voice had lost none of its deep resonance; I told myself that he no longer had any power over me, that it was the air conditioning making me quiver.

“Yes. It’s been a long time.” Two years and three months, give or take a day.

“Genki desu ka?”

“Yes, I’m well. And you?” I avoided his eyes.

He ignored my question and switched to English which he spoke fluently with a slight British accent. Like his father and grandfather before him, he’d had a large part of his education in England; unlike them, he’d also done a two-year stint at Scotland Yard.

“You look tired.”

“I’m fine. I do need your help, though.”

He folded his arms across his chest. “Still attracting all the crime in Japan, then?”

That drew my eyes to his. Another mistake; I was always fascinated by his looks. He was unchanged, as striking as ever with broad dark slashes of brow over black eyes so long and narrow almost no white was visible. His face was wide, with a heavy chin that leant him a slightly doleful air. An old-fashioned face, I’d once heard it described. I knew him to be dogged and intelligent, characteristics that made for a very good cop who should have been on the fast track to the senior ranks. Somehow, his promotions always seemed to get held up, but it didn’t stop him pressing on with the job. At his age, 39, he should have been at least a senior superintendent instead of a simple inspector.

“I hope not.” I held his gaze, trying not to allow his annoyance to fluster me.

“But you don’t know?” he demanded.

“Nooo...No, I don’t,” I admitted. “It’s not me. Let me explain,” I hurried on before he could erupt. “I’m very worried about Yu—”

He stopped me. “Please wait until the constable returns. If it’s really a police matter, I’ll need notes. No point saying everything twice.” He took my business card out of his breast pocket – it could only be the same one I’d given the receptionist – and examined it. “You’ve been promoted.”

Chafing at his ability to contain his curiosity, I stuttered, “Oh, yes. About six months ago. No one else left to do the job. They’ve all been poached, you know...the market.” These days that said everything. Tokyo had been in the grip of roaring bull markets in stocks and property for several years and financial firms had grown exponentially, mine included. “I have a great office to go with it. View of Mt.Fuji. Well, on a clear day, that is. Not many of those, but last winter it was beautiful.”

He smirked. "In a Japanese company having a window would mean the end of your career."

"Yes, I know. I do still use a desk in the main office." I realized that he was teasing. "Well, anyway, it's a British company."

The return of the constable with a tray of tiny ceramic cups on wooden saucers and a pot of green tea kept me from twittering on. When we'd all had a sip of the bitter brew he began formally.

"*Jaa...Knight-san*, please explain why you're here."

Finally, I took a deep breath. "It's because of Yuki...Akashi...Akashi Yuki," I reversed to the Japanese style of stating names, family name first, for the benefit of the constable, who had begun taking notes. "You remember her?" He nodded. "She's gone missing. I'm just so worried."

Yuki was my closest friend and colleague in Japan. Almost from the moment I turned up at Camelot, hot and sweaty on a day much like this one, she became my mentor and cultural informant. I had introduced myself in halting Japanese, make-up running off my face in rivulets, carefully styled hair gone completely flat. She couldn't have arrived much before me, but she looked cool and stylish in a crisp linen dress, not a rumple in sight. She took me to the ladies' room and helped me pull myself together, all the while describing the company, telling me what to expect. Within five minutes I was at ease and ready to start my new job, and my new life.

Yuki seemed to me the epitome of *wabi-sabi*, the sort of elegant simplicity much admired and sought after in Japan. I always hoped that I might somehow acquire a smidgen of it and took her advice on everything from fashion to career. Kei had never liked her influence over me, which he persisted in describing as my 'dependence'. He looked exasperated already, so I rushed on.

"No, Kei...*Shimizu-san*, I'm serious. She hasn't turned up to work in days. It's not like her. She's not at home. Emiko hasn't heard from her. Percy hasn't seen her. I even called *Kuroda-san* this morning." Kei knew how much I disliked Takeshi Kuroda, the man Yuki's family wanted her to marry, so he would understand exactly how concerned I was.

"Slow down," he said, nodding toward the constable who was struggling to keep up with my English. "Had *Kuroda* seen her?"

"I never found out. He sounded drunk. At midday! He said something that sounded rude, not a word I recognized." My Japanese was good, but it was long on economic and business vocabulary and short on street slang and the more offensive swear words. "There was giggling in the background."

Kei pursed his lips, considering. "Let's go back to the beginning. When was the last time you saw her?"

“Monday. She was at work. Perfectly normal. We had supper at Ichioku and walked home together.” His irritation flared, startling his colleague; he hated that I walked the city late at night. As a New Yorker, you should know better, he would say. As a New Yorker, I would counter, I expected to be safer in Tokyo. It was my turn to glare, daring him to bring up the circumstances under which we’d first met, or those that tore us apart. Finally I muttered, “I *wasn’t* alone, except the last hundred yards. Yuki lives quite close by.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. Containment.

“So you separated at what time?”

“About eleven.” He harrumphed. I continued, “I went into her flat after work on Tuesday in case she was ill or injured -- I have a key - but there was no sign of her. Everything looked in order... I mean ... I didn’t go through her things or look in the closets. I don’t think I would have known if anything was missing. We’re close, but we don’t hang out in one another’s homes.” Kei nodded. This was normal. Japanese houses are so tiny that most socializing was done in restaurants and bars.

“Did you ask the neighbours? Or go to the *kōban*?” Mention of the *kōban* brought a cynical smile to my lips: the two young patrolmen ensconced in the tiny street-corner box had been more interested in flirting than hearing about Yuki.

“I knocked on a few doors. The concierge of her building never saw her come in, but he goes off duty at nine. No one seems to have seen her since Monday. There was mail in the box. And I went to the *kōban*.”

“And?”

“And nothing. No one seemed concerned, or even interested. That’s why I’m here. A patrolman took down all the details. Of course, he knew who she was. He said he’d ask around, but I don’t think he took me too seriously.” Judging by his expression, Kei wasn’t either. “It’s not like her at all, to just take off. You can ...” He cut me off with a gesture.

While I caught my breath he changed direction. “What did you talk about over dinner? Was anything troubling her?” he asked. “I know her father died recently.” Yuki’s father was a well-known property developer, a hero of the nineteen-sixties’ economic miracle. His death made the news.

“Yes, but I think that was a relief. He was so ill for so long, in a lot of pain at the end. No, she didn’t seem troubled more than you’d expect.” I pushed a hand through my hair while I considered. It was limp and heavy. “She did joke that she might marry Kuroda-*sau* after all, but we’d had a fair amount of *sake*.” I shrugged. “Her sister’s husband, Wada-*sau*...You remember him?”

“*Uu*,” he confirmed with a half-nod.

“He’s been pressuring her. He sees himself as the head of the family now and he’s very traditional. But Yuki isn’t as much so. She wouldn’t just ‘obey’ him. She’s pretty tough in her own way.”

His expression didn’t change, but his voice was tinged with bitterness when he said: “If I recall, it was Yuki who warned you that we Japanese, no matter how modernized or westernized we might seem, will always revert to type. I expect she was no exception.”

I looked down, stricken: those were about the last words I’d said before I walked away from him, adding only that Yuki had warned me repeatedly that he was not as ‘different’ as I believed. Perhaps he had reason to resent her.

And perhaps he was right. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d underestimated the hold of culture and tradition on even the most cosmopolitan of my Japanese friends and colleagues, Kei himself the most dramatic case in point. Sometimes the more we knew of each others’ societies, the better we spoke each others’ languages, the more we took for granted understanding and acceptance. I had smoothed over enough spats in the office to know how easily misunderstandings could arise.

“And was Emiko concerned? What did she say?” he resumed. Emiko was Yuki’s sister, younger by seven years.

“Yes, well, of course she was. Concerned. But she didn’t say much, really, except that Yuki’d probably gone away for a few days. To a hot spring, perhaps. It was a strange conversation. Stilted. She told me not to trouble myself about it.” I risked raising my eyes to him again. “Percy reckons Emiko was just embarrassed, you know, that an outsider was getting involved in a family matter. I made her promise to call me if she heard anything. I’m positive that Yuki wouldn’t just bunk off work like that, without a word to anyone.”

“I see.” He thought for a few minutes, taking a sip of his tea. “Hmm... It’s not really my area. You know we get tens of thousands of missing person reports every year, but there is nothing we can do without clear evidence of a crime or accident. Constitutional law doesn’t allow for active investigations otherwise. Privacy, you know. And you aren’t even a family member.”

I leaned across the table, folding my hands together in supplication. I could feel the constable’s wide-eyed attention glued to us. She would have plenty to tell round the water cooler later. I ignored her.

“Kei, please, I’m sure something is wrong...you must realize, I wouldn’t ask otherwise. Please.

Onegai shimasu.”

He considered me for what seemed like an age. “*Ja*, I’ll see what I can do. Please give Tanaka here as many of her details as you can.” He indicated the constable, prompting her to return her gaze to her notebook. “I’ll be right back...”

I watched him leave the room without ceremony and, releasing my breath and sitting back in the chair, turned to the young woman. Her expression belied her curiosity, but she would never have asked about my connection with her boss. Perhaps she knew. It hadn’t been a great secret.

I gave her what facts I could muster: Yuki Akashi was born on April 11 in the 32nd year of Showa, or 1957. She was Head of Research Administration at Camelot, where she had been working for the last ten years. She lived in Yotsuya Yonchome, a residential district in the centre of Tokyo, not far from me. Her only relation was her sister, Mrs. Emiko Wada, who lived in a tiny farming village in western Honshū. It was only a half-day’s travel from Tokyo by road or rail; in social and cultural terms it was as far as one could get, the ‘real Japan’ in the eyes of some, although, with three-quarters of the population living in the cities, it would be better termed ‘nostalgic Japan’.

Finally, the constable stood and closed her notepad. She asked me to wait for the *Keishi* and bowed herself out of the room.

“*Keishi?*” I wondered. “What’s that? Superintendent? Chief Superintendent? A promotion anyway, so he’s getting what he wanted.” I tried to be pleased for him. He’d sacrificed our relationship to his career. At least it wasn’t wasted.

The door opened again and Kei leaned in. “Finished? I’ll walk you out.”

I jumped up, but the chair nearly came with me my sweaty thighs were so stuck to it. It hit the floor with a clatter and my handbag fell. When I finally retrieved the bag and stood up I was flustered and flushed. Kei was watching me without expression. He held the door wide and I slipped past him as carefully as I could.

The corridors were busier than when I came in. As we walked, he spoke softly, as if to an upset child.

“You know, people go missing all the time for no obvious reason and we don’t find many of them. Unless they’ve been the victim of an accident or a crime, or the perpetrator of a crime, they can easily fall off the radar.”

“You said that before, but I find it hard to believe. Japan is too controlled a society.”

“Still, it happens even here. It’s not that hard to disappear.” He added pointedly, “Especially if you have money and want to escape intolerable family pressures.”

“Well, you can check that, can’t you? If she’s withdrawn a large sum of money?”

“Possibly. It would be easier if there were some suspicious circumstances...”

I stopped and faced him, ignoring the people forced to detour around us. “Her absence *is* a suspicious circumstance.”

“Perhaps.”

I wanted to argue, but he touched the base of my spine lightly to propel me forward, reminding me of where we were. As we resumed walking, he asked, “Why didn’t you just phone me with this?”

I had, of course, considered phoning. In many ways it would have been more expedient and might have saved me the emotional upheaval of seeing him again. But I’d wanted to be certain that he understood the extent of my concern; that he took me more seriously than the local cops had. In Japan, when you want to get something done, only face to face communication would do, I thought. But maybe I was kidding myself.

Without looking at him, I said: “I wanted to be sure...that you understood how worried I am. No one else will listen. I know Yuki wasn’t your favourite person...”

We reached the exit. He handed me his card, taking me aback after his earlier familiarity by bowing deeply and speaking very formally.

“I’m pleased to see you again, although I’m sorry that you are troubled. Leave it with me.”

Somewhat bemused, I bowed back.

“I’m in your debt.”

“Not at all. I’ll be in touch.” It was nearly a whisper. **HELP**, I wanted to scream. But, conscious of the receptionists watching, I simply thanked him and took my leave.

I could feel his eyes on my back as I walked away.

Tokyo, July 1989

Kinyoobi
(Friday)

II

A curious mixture of excitement and relief drove me on. I'd done it. I'd seen him and survived the encounter without turning into a blithering idiot or a blubbering wreck. The worst was past and, although he hadn't seemed overjoyed at seeing me again, he had at least listened. He looked as good as ever, I thought. It wasn't fair. In the last two years, I had been working upwards of 14 hours a day, six, sometimes seven days a week, powered by strong coffee and little else. I hadn't slept a night through in all that time. I hadn't slept at all the last two nights. Kei was being kind when he said I seemed 'tired'.

Was he still watching? I fought the urge to glance back and to smooth down my skirt, which was sticking to my legs and riding up. If I did, he would know that I was sensitive to his scrutiny. We'd been here before, he and I, at the beginning of our relationship. Then I had wondered what he thought about what he was seeing as I walked away. In my own mind, I was rather average for a western woman; maybe a little shapelier than was fashionable, but neither fat nor thin and of middling height. Compared to the petite Japanese women around me, though, I often felt large and ungainly. A night out drinking with colleagues more than once had degenerated into amused speculation about whether it would be possible to dress me in a *kimono*, which was designed for considerably fewer curves than I possessed. The very thought of trying to get that elegant garment to lie flat and even across my breasts would cause otherwise staid analysts to collapse in giggles.

The unwanted attention my body attracted was not new. I had matured early and become an object of fascination to my classmates, both male and female. This was uncomfortable, but the interest adult men began showing in me was downright alarming. I became increasingly self-conscious and awkward, so much so that I was forever tripping over cracks in the pavement or walking into lamp posts. But when, at the age of thirteen, someone in school gave me the nickname 'swivel hips', I became determined to adopt what I hoped was a controlled gait with minimal wasted motion. I kept my head down, shoulders forward and advanced with purpose, that being to avoid notice, lewd suggestions, wolf whistles, etc.

But I had wanted this man's eyes on me. I remembered wondering if he was fixated on my neck, as Japanese men were reputed to do. My hairdresser had cropped my dark hair because, he said, it was a

shame not to show my (too) long neck to advantage. And I'd kept it that way for convenience, thinking then as now that, surely, men were men and all looked at the same things. Just in case, I had straightened up, given my skirt a little tug, and let my hips swing a bit. And promptly stumbled over the kerb.

Not this time, I told myself. Just keep moving, one foot in front of the other. I stepped into the road without tripping and was immediately rocked back when a taxi whizzed past, horn blaring, its wheels two inches from my feet.

I don't remember how I got back to work after that. Although my motive for seeing Kei was to ask his help in finding Yuki, a part of me craved some sign that he regretted what he had lost. But I had to concede that, if he had before, he wouldn't now, not after seeing me worn out, dishevelled and as clumsy as ever.

It doesn't matter, I berated myself. The main thing is that he finds Yuki. The sight of her undisturbed desk in its partitioned space outside my office filled me with anxiety, and not a little guilt for indulging in self-pity when she could be hurt or in trouble.

I could imagine her there, sitting straight-backed, almost prim, as her long, slender fingers wrote out expense sheets in precise letters, pen barely seeming to move. Her glossy, blunt-cut hair would fall in a smooth sheet across her cheek. If someone interrupted her she would carefully set her work aside before looking up to give the supplicant her full attention. It was Yuki who kept Research running. If she was gone much longer, it would all fall apart.

"Dammit, Yuki," I said aloud, "What the hell is going on?"

I sat down in her seat and surveyed the surface of the desk. The in-tray was piled with phone messages and reports and her daily calendar was still open to Tuesday. She would have turned it over as she left Monday evening. A navy cardigan hung on the back of the chair.

It was still lunch hour, so the department was nearly deserted. I decided to go through the drawers, just in case there was something, anything to give me an idea of where she might be. Keeping a mental inventory, I examined each object: no relevant notations for the week in the diary; two boxes of visitors' business cards, one carefully alphabetized, the other organized according to the *hiragana* syllabary; perfectly squared stacks of research reports in English and expense reports in Japanese; and four back issues of the *Nikkei*, Japan's financial newspaper. There was also the file containing everyone's vacation request forms; it was Yuki's job as Administrator to coordinate holidays. She rarely took them herself,

but I checked through the sheets for the second time that week just to make sure that I hadn't overlooked something. There was nothing.

Kimiko, the most senior office lady, had taken over the scheduling of client and company visits, so the absence of that key file didn't worry me. The lower right hand drawer yielded a cosmetics bag containing a toothbrush and toothpaste, a hairbrush, a packet of tissues and assorted bits of make-up. There was also a passbook from Mitsui Bank. It was about the size of a postcard with a picture of Paddington bear on the cover.

I turned it over in my hand. Yuki wouldn't have left it behind if she'd intended to leave. On the other hand, maybe her most recent transactions would provide a clue. Had she withdrawn all her savings and abandoned the defunct passbook? Was I invading her privacy if I peeked? Should I put it back in the drawer, lock the desk, and get Kei to come and look?

What the hell. I looked. And learned not much. The account held a balance of about half a million yen, less than \$5,000. There had been a few withdrawals in the preceding weeks, ranging from ¥50,000 to ¥200,000, but a similar number of deposits kept the total steady. It was not the account she used to receive her pay, and I was certain that she had considerable savings: our pay had skyrocketed over the last six years, but Yuki's lifestyle hadn't changed at all. She probably put it in fixed deposits or investment trusts, I thought, remembering the lunchtime queue of Vuitton bag-clutching housewives in front of a branch of Nomura Securities. Everyone was into the market these days and it wasn't unusual for people to have multiple bank and investment accounts; perhaps this one was for a specific purpose, such as paying bills or sending money to her niece and nephew. I slipped the passbook back into its plastic pouch and set it on top of the desk.

The centre drawer held a black lacquer spoon - a memento of Yuki's father's funeral- and a small brown paper bag with five red buttons in it. I tipped them into my hand and rubbed my thumb over their smooth surfaces, remembering our first trip together to Ameyoko, the sanitized remains of the last post-war black market and one of the cheapest places in Tokyo to buy anything.

"What are we looking for?" I asked as she marched past tables loaded with plastic kewpie dolls of all sizes, wooden pop-guns, spinning tops, yo-yos and marbles.

"Buttons," she answered.

"Buttons? Why?"

She slowed for a moment, looking over a display of nylon bras, pants and slips.

“I found some nice blouses in the Yaesu shopping arcade the other day. If I put on distinctive buttons, they’ll look just like designer tops.”

We passed acrylic knitwear, slippers and plastic shoes; old women with dyed black hair and loose trousers eddied around us, trying to draw our attention to their wares. Tables laden with bolts of fabric and skeins of wool loomed up ahead.

“But Yuki, why not just buy designer to begin with? Surely you can afford it.”

She looked askance at me, but her eye was caught by a roll of aquamarine silk that actually looked very good quality.

“I wish I could sew,” she sighed as she fingered it. “Maybe I could find someone to make me a suit.” I didn’t volunteer that I was a competent seamstress. I’d left all that behind.

She shook her head and turned her attention back to me.

“Why, when I can personalize things myself for a lot less money? Anyway, I’ve been coming here ever since I can remember and the buttons were always my favourite part.”

When we finally found the stall, I could understand why. It was laden with an astonishing array made from every possible material – mother of pearl, bone, ivory, tortoise shell, ceramic, glass, wood, silver, brass, diamante and plastic – in an infinite variety of sizes and colours. It was impossible not to dig your hands into the trays and run the ones with cool, polished surfaces through your fingers, to feel the textured designs of others, or to hold those made of coloured glass up to the light.

A woman of indeterminate age bustled up to us with an ingratiating smile that revealed a scattering of gold teeth. She was about to launch into her spiel when she recognized Yuki.

“*Ara*, aren’t you Miss Akashi? It’s been a long time. So kind of you to come to see my meagre offerings. And to bring your friend.” She cast a curious glance at me. “Is there anything special you’re looking for?”

Yuki returned her greetings and explained who I was. When the stallholder realized I could understand her, she turned the full force of her sales pitch on me. “It’s a poor selection, but please take a look.”

Yuki laughed. “Nonsense, it’s the best place in Tokyo...no, all Japan, for buttons.”

The old woman bowed deeply. “You’re too kind. Just like your mother. Now there was a lady. Elegant down to her toes, even during the worst times. But so fragile, poor thing. Such a shame...”

A shadow passed over Yuki's face. She turned away, bent over the table and scooped up a handful of tiny, shell pink buttons. She held them up to the light, but her eyes seemed oddly unfocused as she examined them.

The buttons I was now holding were distinctive, almost two centimetres across, square with the corners slightly rounded. Their colour was deep, almost burgundy, but with small variations in their polished depths. I wasn't with her when she bought them, but I remembered admiring them on the cream linen blouse she wore on Monday, because they perfectly matched the colour of her skirt.

She always purchased by the dozen, but I was pretty sure she'd only used five on that top. I wondered what happened to the other two.

My trawl through Yuki's desk reinforced my feeling that she hadn't intended to vanish, so Kei's theory couldn't be right. Maybe I was guilty of 'over-thinking', as he used to call it whenever I worried, but I felt a frisson of fear.

Yuki's phone rang, startling me into spilling the buttons onto the carpet. I grabbed for the handset as I bent to retrieve them.

"*Moshi moshi*. Hello. *Chosa-bu desu*. Research."

"*Yu-chan?*" a somewhat shrill male voice asked. Kuroda. It wasn't surprising that he should mistake me for Yuki. I learned all my telephone manners from her, down to her intonation when using polite language in an artificially high voice.

"Knight *desu ga* ...," I corrected.

He sounded anxious and disconcerted. "Oh, Knight-*san*. This is Kuroda. I was wondering if Miss Akashi had come back to work yet."

"No, I'm afraid she hasn't. You wouldn't have any idea where she might have gone, would you?" I asked as I put the last of the buttons in the bag and returned it to the drawer. At the same time I pulled out the only other item there: a draft of the Japan Modern new issue report. Even though I knew that Yuki might have an interest in the future of the company, I couldn't imagine why she would have the unedited report stashed in her desk. I used it to fan myself while I listened to Kuroda hem and haw.

"No, I just...I'm worried...like you."

"Really? You didn't sound very worried when I phoned you yesterday." I didn't give him a chance to answer. "I've been to see the police, so I expect you'll be hearing from them soon."

His voice became piercing. “You what? Why?”

“Kuroda-san,” I said in the calmest tone I could muster, “she hasn’t turned up to work for three days. That’s why. If you were truly concerned, you’d be relieved that I went for help. I’m sorry, if there’s nothing else, I have to go. *Excuse me.*” I set the phone firmly in its cradle and looked at the document in my hand.

Kuroda must be the key to this, I thought, whether Yuki had vanished of her own accord to escape him or – I shuddered to think – he had done something to her. She would have inherited a considerable sum of money from her father, but Kuroda couldn’t be so desperate for that when his own family was about to make a killing by listing their company on the stock exchange.

Or could he? In the current environment, money and land were paramount and, in this crucible of greed, everything about Japan seemed to be changing. Kuroda himself was symptomatic, flaunting his wealth in a way that would have been unthinkable even five years earlier. Perhaps he couldn’t sustain the playboy lifestyle without an even bigger infusion of cash than the listing would provide.

An hour had passed since I’d sat down at Yuki’s desk and the department was still empty when I roused myself from my musings. I wondered where everyone could be, but was grateful to be able to duck into my office, still clutching the Japan Modern draft, without attracting attention.

For the first time since my promotion, I appreciated the isolation. Stockbrokers and investment analysts thrive on news and gossip; it was important to stay connected. But Camelot Tokyo had grown from twenty-six people to four hundred since I’d joined six years before, acquiring in the process a layer of bureaucracy of which I was now a reluctant part. I still had a desk in the open plan area, a space the size of a football field, and I worked there as often as I could, keeping one ear tuned to the chat around me. The private office was mainly for confidential talks and client meetings.

This afternoon, however, I needed quiet to restore my equilibrium. But before I could close the door, Percy Harbury-Scott appeared, looking for all the world like a lost and neglected puppy with his sandy hair flopping in his eyes.

Although we’d worked together for more than six years and often socialized after hours as well, Percy was still a cipher to me. His naughty schoolboy looks and laidback manner belied the keenness of his mind, particularly where the market was concerned. He had been one of, if not *the* first broker to see the huge expansion of liquidity heading for shares and property like a tsunami, swamping all rational

calculations of value. And for that he'd made Camelot one of the most respected foreign securities companies in Japan, become a Director and increased his own income ten-fold.

Nevertheless, he continued to live like the drifter he'd started out as. He'd first come to Japan ten years earlier on the JET programme, which recruited English speakers to teach, and spent a few years in Japanese high schools surrounded by giggling girls before moving on to copy editing, mainly English translations of corporations' annual reports. At the same time he studied Japanese while pursuing an interest in Zen meditation and yoga. It was only a chance meeting with an acquaintance of his father's that introduced him to Camelot. Despite his lack of financial expertise, he was hired immediately, Eton and Oxford the only real qualifications needed.

"Well...any luck? Will he help?"

It was at Percy's insistence that I went to see Kei at all. He loved Yuki, almost to distraction, and was as worried as his Zen-induced calm would allow. He'd worked out a convoluted scenario in which Kuroda, with the help of his less than savoury associates, was so desperate for her inheritance that he'd kidnapped her. Although I'd dismissed this at first, now I wondered if he weren't on the right track. Nevertheless, I pointed out that, if that were the case, he wouldn't harm her. But Percy still believed that she could be bullied into the arranged marriage.

"I've seen it happen to too many of my friends," he said. "Remember Kazu? His parents physically dragged him back to Hokkaido and made him marry the girl they picked out for him, never mind that he was openly gay. Or Mariko?" Mariko had been a rising star, an intelligent, bilingual economist with a clever turn of phrase, much liked by our clients. She'd resigned after her marriage last year. "Her mother threatened to commit suicide if she didn't do what her father wanted. Now she's housebound with a baby in a two room flat in some dreary high rise in the middle of nowhere. She'll probably end up jumping off the roof taking the baby with her."

"I know. It gives a whole new meaning to the term 'shotgun wedding'. But anyway Yuki isn't likely to give in to pressure, even by kidnapping. Why would she? Her father's gone now and she has enough money. She doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to, probably not even work."

Yuki had disabused me of my romantic notions when she and Percy started dating. She disliked the idea of marriage, although she never said why beyond calling men 'spoilt'. After raising her sister from the age of five after their mother's death, she seemed to have no desire to repeat the experience for herself even though she doted on her niece and nephew. She liked Percy, found him entertaining and

gentle, but I suspected she'd been stringing him along for years. Sometimes I thought she did it just to annoy her father and, now that her father was dead, her brother-in-law.

"She works because people don't respect you if you don't. She could marry Kuroda for the same reason, because she's expected to..." I watched him clench and unclench his hands. It was getting to him more than I realized.

Percy had already canvassed Yuki's neighbours and nearby shopkeepers and phoned anyone he could think of who might have an idea of her whereabouts. When Kuroda wouldn't answer his calls, he'd gone to bang on his door in Denenchofu, one of Tokyo's most expensive suburbs. He was told that Miss Akashi was none of his business and escorted off the premises. Shortly afterwards I received a phone call from Kuroda's father, considerably more strident than the one I'd just fielded from the son, demanding to know where she was.

"Sit down, Percy."

I watched him fold his lanky frame into the visitor's chair. It was usually Percy who reassured me when I was troubled, advising me to follow his example and take up Zen meditation and yoga. He even had a room in his apartment that was off limits to everyone but himself in order to preserve the "*Wa*", or harmony, required for his meditation. Only Yuki seemed able to disturb his carefully maintained tranquillity. Now I took on the unaccustomed role of soothing him.

"Kei said he would look into it even though there's something in the Constitution that prevents the police investigating someone unless there's evidence of a crime. We can't ask more than that, especially as he thinks she's done a bunk to escape the pressure to marry Kuroda." Or you, I refrained from adding. She'd told me that Percy had been pressing her for a commitment; I felt a bit guilty that I knew she wouldn't give it to him.

"But she wouldn't do that without telling me. Would she?" He bounced his fists on the arms of the chair.

"Wouldn't she? I just don't know any more," I said with a sigh. "I would have said the same, and yet she's gone. Emiko didn't seem at all bothered. At least, she didn't want me to get involved." I looked out over the city again before adding, "Kei kindly reminded me not to be fooled by a veneer of westernization."

"What's that supposed to mean? All Japanese are inscrutable and will ultimately act in ways we *gaijin* couldn't possibly understand? Bollocks." He leaned across my desk. "She's not Kei and you know

it.” Percy was the only person besides Yuki who knew that my break-up with Kei had its origins deep in cultural misunderstanding, but out of loyalty he blamed only Kei. I don’t think he realized that my situation was more evidence, if any were needed, to convince Yuki that long-term relationships, particularly with foreigners, rarely work.

“Well, maybe I’ll call him.” Percy continued, “Try to explain why I’m so sure something’s wrong. Can you give me his number?”

I rummaged for Kei’s card in my purse and handed it across the desk. He took it and subsided, looking so downcast that I searched for something else to say, but nothing would come. Instead I changed the subject.

“By the way, Percy, where is everyone?”

“Don’t you remember? It’s Research’s turn to attend the fraud seminar.”

I groaned. I should have been there. The unprecedented rise in share prices over the last two years, without much economic justification many would argue, had led to an equal, unwelcome increase in insider trading, investment scams and a host of other dodgy dealings. The catalyst for reform was the previous year’s Recruit Scandal, which brought down the Takeshita Government and seriously damaged the ruling party after revelations that top officials had been ‘sold’ excessively cheap shares in a Recruit subsidiary a month before they were listed. The share price skyrocketed on listing, yielding an average profit of ¥66 million, or about US\$550,000 to each of them. The Prime Minister’s closest aide committed suicide and twenty people were arrested.

But this was only the biggest and most public of the questionable practices. As part of the drive to clean up the Tokyo market’s image and raise standards to the level of New York and London, the staff was being indoctrinated in what was illegal according to new legislation. It was important to be seen to attend, even for foreigners already familiar with such rules from their own countries.

“Don’t worry,” Percy said. “There’ll be more sessions, although they’d do better to focus on the Japanese brokers. We’re hardly likely to get the inside scoop on anything, or to be able to ramp a share the way the Big Four can.”

As he stood to go his eyes fell on the Japan Modern report on my desk. He scowled and muttered, “Talk about scandals. We shouldn’t be involved in that deal.”

“Why not? They own land all around Tokyo Bay. There aren’t many other plays left on that theme.” I supposed Percy’s hatred of Kuroda was the source of his hostility.

“Well, I won’t be pushing those shares on any of my clients. Have you seen their stores?”

“No, but...”

“It’s all a big shell game, if you ask me. Or a pyramid. Yeah, that’s a better description. Share prices rise every time property prices go up because of the value of the unrealized assets; the rise in the share price increases wealth which drives property prices up. A virtuous circle, some call it. Except the whole structure is founded on nothing more than a huge cash surplus and some daft national delusion that Japanese real estate values can never fall. If you ask me, Corporate Finance was so desperate to get in on a new listing they didn’t assess it carefully.”

He caught my look of alarm at these words. My analysts had written that report. I had signed off on it.

“I’m not suggesting there’s anything wrong with the report,” he rushed to reassure me. “Just that Kuroda won’t reinvest in the business or sell the land to realize its value. If he hasn’t already, he’ll probably borrow against it like everyone else and then piss away the proceeds.”

Nonetheless, I would have to take another look.

Percy shrugged. “Thanks for doing that, anyway. I know it can’t have been easy, going to the *Keishicho*. Later...”

Tokyo, July 1989

Kinyoobi
(Friday)

III

As soon as the door closed behind him, I shut the vertical blinds on the glass wall that separated me from the rest and, putting my feet up on the air conditioning unit under the window, leaned back in my chair and looked out over the city. My city, I thought, the one that had taken me in when I had nothing to lose, nowhere else to go; that had given me new friends, an exciting career, another life. Even behind hermetically sealed windows I could feel the buzz that never seemed to stop, or even diminish much, no matter the time of day or year.

When, I wondered, had it stopped being energizing and become enervating?

From my vantage point, on the 25th floor of the ARK Mori building looking west I could see much of the vast urban sprawl that is Tokyo. It was mostly low-rise, but a few taller buildings poked up here and there, many with terraced rooftops, an urban echo of hillside rice paddies. The streets weren't laid out in any systematic way, reflecting the spontaneous growth that accompanied the seventeenth century change from fishing village to capital. A flimsy city, lacking the architectural solidity of London or Paris, the granite bedrock of New York. So often the victim of disasters - typhoon, earthquake, wartime bombing - Tokyo sprang back from each devastation rapidly and haphazardly. The result was visual cacophony. There were very few, and those very small, patches of green, and an occasional red tiled roof. Otherwise it was all shades of cement and ferro-concrete. Only the narrow black ribbon of the *Shuto-kō* stretching away into the distance tied it all together.

There were few skyscrapers in the city at that time and, at 37 stories above ground (and four below), our building was one of the tallest around. It was a condition that wouldn't last long, I thought with regret: in the last few years, a forest of construction cranes had sprung up all around us, yet another symptom of the boom. For now, though, I could see all the way to Mount Fuji, some one hundred kilometres away, on a clear day. But today the sky was leaden and grimy, blending seamlessly with the conurbation beneath, and the cloud cover was so thick that there was no prospect of seeing the snow-capped summit anytime soon.

At night all the ugliness would vanish, the greyness fading to become a mere canvas for the infinite array of vibrant neon lights that outlined the city. This pulsating rainbow advertised an astonishing variety of pubs, clubs, shops and restaurants in particularly heavy concentrations around the major railway stations, which, from this height, seemed to glow like stars in a constellation with the dark, forbidden mass of the Imperial Palace at its centre. I read somewhere that, seen from space, Tokyo is the brightest city on the planet. It was easy to believe.

From my present perspective, all that now seemed little more than gloss over a fundamentally inhospitable environment. This was more Kei's Tokyo than mine: a city in which gangsters strutted unchallenged, arbitrarily intimidating people in their path; where shame kept victims from reporting rapes and assaults to the police; where the homeless hid themselves; where unfortunate women from Southeast Asia or, latterly, the crumbling Soviet bloc, were forced into prostitution. And where 'respectable' women should not walk alone late at night, whatever the crime statistics might say.

Ughh! Turning away, I leaned further back in my chair and shut my eyes. My thoughts ricocheted between Yuki and Kei. In ten years Yuki had only missed work once, when her father died. Something must have happened to her between my house and hers on Monday evening.

I tried to imagine how she would have coped with an assailant: probably by trying to convince him that he didn't really want to attack her. She was forever making me think better of handing in my resignation when I was full of self-righteous indignation on some point of principle or other, or else pushing me to put myself forward for this or that opportunity within the firm. The only time she'd failed to persuade me to do what she advised was when I fell in love with Kei.

I could still recall the conversation. I was in Keio University Hospital, recovering from my own brush with a late night attacker. Yuki was fussing around me, tidying my things, arranging flowers sent by the office, inspecting my injuries. All I could talk about was Inspector Shimizu, my rescuer.

"You should have seen him, Yuki. He was completely gorgeous. He smelled of sandalwood and ...something else. Something spicy...And his voice! God, his voice! He could be ugly as sin, that voice alone would be more than enough, oozing over me like warm molasses..."

Yuki's grimace stalled my transports. She found my occasional earthiness coarse and tried to discourage it. Although I admired her refinement, she was sometimes too reticent, willing to talk about men in very superficial, abstract terms, but rarely about love and never about sex.

This time she said: “Gina-san, he used you as bait to catch that man. He knew he was after foreign women and let him follow you home without even warning you. I hope the police department is going to compensate you for your injuries.”

I brushed away her indignation. “Inspector Shimizu explained and apologized. He was right behind him the whole time. It was just bad luck that I got hurt. He did the right thing. I was never in any real danger and I don’t need compensation.”

“And you don’t need him either. Anyway, I thought you were avoiding men after the trombone player.”

I subsided. “French horn. You’re right. I am. But...”

“He’s at least 35,” she said flatly, taking a stack of magazines off the chair by my bed and sitting stiffly on the edge of the seat. She busied herself aligning the pile.

“Oh, you did meet him then?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Then how do you know?”

“His rank.” It made sense. In Japanese organizations, advancement was often as much related to age as to ability.

“So? I’m 26. Nine years isn’t such a big difference.”

“Maybe not, but a man that age is probably married. If he isn’t, the reason won’t be a good one.”

“Oh.” I thought about that, picking at bits of fluff on the sheet. “How can you know that if you haven’t seen or spoken to him? He might be different. He sounded different. His English was as polished as Percy’s.”

She shrugged. “Window dressing. Even if he was raised abroad, underneath he’s still a Japanese man working in a Japanese organization.” She set the magazines aside and folded her hands in her lap.

“But you don’t *know* that ...”

I trailed off when I saw her expression harden. She clenched her jaw as if holding back a burst of uncharacteristic anger. She was facing me, but her stare was somewhere beyond. After long silent minutes she allowed herself a grim smile and turned her attention to one of the magazines while saying in a controlled tone. “It doesn’t really matter one way or the other. If he’s as handsome as you say, he’s probably full of himself. No doubt women throw themselves at him, especially the sort police deal with. Didn’t you learn anything from the trombone player?”

I didn't want to believe her; I wanted Inspector Shimizu to be a man who crossed the cultural divide. Although our encounter had been brief, he seemed to ooze integrity and sincerity.

Still, her intensity made me wonder what her experience had been. It also made me uneasy. So I laughed. After all, to Inspector Shimizu I was just a crime victim; he'd probably forgotten me already. And I really didn't need to get involved with anyone, not when my career was just taking off. I said so and changed the subject, thanking her for all the trouble she was taking and asking what was happening in the office.

A light knock on my office door shook me from my reverie. Another of the salesmen, a Scot called Jamie McLeod who had recently come across from London, pushed it open and walked in.

"Hiding, huh? I was looking for you out there." He waved towards the outer office.

"Sorry, Jamie. Come on in, have a seat. I'm just a bit limp at the moment. I walked over to the *Keishicho*." I smiled in spite of myself. Jamie was infectiously cheerful with his curly russet hair and ready grin.

"In this weather? It's 38° and 100% humidity out there. What's that word the Japanese use?" He slumped into the visitor's chair and stretched his legs out toward the side of my desk.

"*Mushiatsu*?" I asked, suddenly conscious of my sweat-rumpled clothing and the thin film of salt crystals on my now dried and chilled skin.

Jamie seemed not to notice, however. "That's the one. Mushy-at-soo-ee." He repeated. "Very onomatopoeic, don't you think?" The literal translation was hot and humid, but the word itself conveyed so much more, all the sticky, sweaty discomfort of the relentless heat. "How can it be 100% humidity and not rain? You practically need gills to breathe outside. Have you heard there's a typhoon warning up?" I hadn't, but it didn't surprise me. The air was heavy, laden with menace, and the cloud cover had become even thicker and more leaden since my return. "So far, they're saying that it will sideswipe us. So I guess we can go ahead with dinner tonight."

I must have looked blank.

"You haven't forgotten that we're having dinner with Andrew Nickerson from Scottish Standard, have you?" His eyes, fascinating for the way that they would change in seconds from light grey to almost charcoal or any shade in between, went dark.

Of course I had. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but this was a new client for Jamie and he was keen to impress him. He would also be the last visitor until September. I suppressed a sigh and smiled. “No, no. I haven’t forgotten. What’s the plan?”

“We pick him up at seven at the Imperial, and then go on to Manbow’s.” He looked me up and down, clearly taking stock of my dishevelled state. Inside I groaned. I was just too shattered and I couldn’t imagine that I’d be together enough to talk business tonight. He read my thoughts. “The show must go on,” he said, smiling sympathetically. “I just hope Percy will be ok.”

I frowned. “Why? I mean, I know he’s a bit upset, but...”

“Oh, aye, more than a bit, I’d say. He practically beheaded one of the dealers for a mistake this morning. I’ve never seen him so angry. In fact, I’ve never seen him angry at all. But he had a murderous look in his eyes when he gave the poor lassie what for. She went away in tears.”

Murderous? Percy?

“Really? It doesn’t seem like him at all. I don’t...” I stopped. “Maybe he shouldn’t come along tonight...then again, if he stays home, he’ll just brood.”

It promised to be a difficult evening.

Jamie nodded his agreement. “Anyway, Manbow’s should be some consolation.” The restaurant was a team favourite, another symptom of the rising affluence that was also rapidly raising Tokyo’s cosmopolitan cachet.

“Mmm, I guess so. I’ll have a shower next door and change into my emergency outfit.” Next door was the ANA hotel where we had a corporate membership to the health centre. I always kept a spare suit in the office, but it was a bit too warm for the time of year. Still, I couldn’t appear in what I had on and going home would take too long. “Where should I meet you?”

“We’ve got the car and driver tonight. I’ll pick you up at the ANA at 6:45, OK?” He bounced up from his seat. “Thanks. I owe you one. How about I take you to Le Paradis next week? Just you and me, ok?”

Something about the way he said that set my alarm bells ringing. He was attractive, no doubt about it, but I wasn’t looking for another involvement.

Smiling coolly, I got up and followed him to the door.

“That would be nice,” I murmured as he waved his farewell. I watched him amble back to Sales.

It was well past three o'clock by this time, so everyone had been back for a while. When my office door opened, several of the analysts and juniors looked in my direction, openly curious. I realized that I needed to make the rounds, to talk to everyone about their current projects and summer holiday plans as well as to reassure them that we were doing what we could to find Yuki.

The forty strong staff of Research was a mixed bag of locals and British, Americans and antipodeans, male and female aged from early twenties to late forties. Status among the analysts tended to depend more on linguistic ability, which varied widely, than experience, performance or age. Some of the older Japanese men found it difficult to deal with that even though, by going to work for a foreign firm, they had opted out of the Japanese system which emphasized time in service. Many of the juniors were young Japanese women, some eager for the sort of career opportunities hard to find in the larger domestic firms, the rest on the lookout for a *gaijin* boyfriend. Jamie was a popular target at the moment.

I tried to give everyone some time, but it was mostly casual chat. There was an end-of-term feeling about the place, even though we had another two weeks to go before *Obon*, the summer festival of the dead which sent many back to their hometowns and shut the city down.

There was also an undercurrent of anxiety. At first I thought this was because of the seminar they'd just attended, but most shrugged it off as preaching to the converted. Then I wondered if it had to do with Yuki's unexplained absence, but Ono, one of the senior analysts, soon enlightened me.

"Ah, Gina-san. I wanted to ask you about this rumour." he said, coming out from behind his partition as I approached his desk.

"Rumour? What rumour is that, Ono-san?" On any given day there were dozens, as Ono well knew. He was our most experienced analyst, and it showed in his permanently world-weary expression. I resisted the urge to smile at him; despite nearly twenty years in the employ of a British firm, he would misinterpret it and assume that I was hiding something if I did.

"Richard-san in New York office said he saw Mallory coming out of the Pierre Hotel with John Chandler, the chief executive of the Arcadian Bank and Trust."

"What?"

"Richard-san..."

"No, I understood you. I was just taken aback. I haven't heard anything." I glanced around the room; a few heads turned quickly away. Michael Mallory was our chairman. Arcadian was a big bank looking to get bigger. They had already bought a UK broker and tied up with another in South Korea.

They had a substantial commercial banking presence in Tokyo and no doubt wanted to get into broking like their main competitor, Citicorp. We'd all watched with sadness and worry when Vickers da Costa, our most illustrious rival with a history as long as ours in Japan, was swallowed up by Citicorp earlier in the year.

Mallory had promised many times that it wouldn't happen to us. Camelot was his baby, he said, and he wouldn't dream of selling out to the Americans even though we struggled to keep up. As new firms entered the market and old ones expanded, pay for analysts and brokers had increased ten-fold since 1983 and the number of staff by a factor of fifteen. Our old-fashioned partnership structure made it difficult to sustain the level of spending that others, whose corporate parents had deep pockets, could. We held our own mainly because Mallory fostered a collegial work environment in which loyalty and commitment mattered, and were rewarded, as much as ability, a reflection of his obsession with the Camelot of legend.

"Does everyone know?" I asked Ono.

"I think so. They must be doing a deal. Richard-*sanz* says they use suites at the Pierre for negotiations," he said, taking off his metal-rimmed granny glasses. He examined the lenses, reached into his pocket for a handkerchief and began polishing them.

"You've known Mallory longer than I have, Ono-*sanz*. Do you think he would sell out?" Ono shook his head to indicate his uncertainty. "Well, the only way to find out is to ask. I'll call when London wakes up."

"You'll let me know...?"

"Yes, of course." He raised a hand in acknowledgement and went back into his cubby hole, putting his glasses back on as he sat and resumed punching numbers into a spreadsheet on the computer.

I should have asked him about Japan Modern as he was the head of the small team that followed the retail sector and produced the research, but I decided to wait until I'd had a chance to read it over again.

As I headed back to my office, Nemue Hagi, one of the junior analysts, stepped into the aisle and blocked my path. I bit back a huff of irritation. Hagi was the last new hire made by my predecessor, and not a very good one: she had an overdeveloped notion of her own importance and a strong sense of entitlement. The others might run in the other direction when they saw her coming, but I couldn't

“Excuse me, Knight-*sau*?” She came up close, invading my personal space in a very un-Japanese way.

“Yes, Hagi-san? What can I do for you?” The determined set of her mouth told me I was in for a rough ride. I braced myself.

“I haven’t had my holiday approval back yet,” she spat.

Was that all? “I’m sorry, Hagi-*sau*. I haven’t seen it yet. You know things are a bit behind with Akashi-*sau* away.”

“That’s your problem.” No hesitation, no polite ‘*onegai shimasu*’. If she hadn’t had her hair cut in the ‘cute’ style – shoulder length bob with permed fringe – favoured by middle-class princesses and one snaggle tooth standing at right angles to the others, I wouldn’t have believed she was Japanese. “Anyway, you should fire Yuki Akashi for failing to report to work.”

“That is *not* your problem,” I snapped. With an effort, I tamped down my annoyance. “When is your vacation?”

“The last two weeks of August.”

“That should be fine. You can assume it’s been approved. If you’ll excuse me...”

By the time I escaped, a few of the staff with particularly long commutes had checked up on the typhoon’s status and asked if they could leave early to get home before it made landfall. Even if Tokyo were bypassed, there would be heavy rain and winds which would immeasurably worsen the already difficult Friday night journey home. I shooed them out the door.

This reminded me that it was getting late. I had to think about going down to shower and change, but I wanted to call Yuki’s sister, Emiko, before I left. When I’d phoned her earlier in the week, she’d been reticent and a bit dismissive. But this time I intended to convince her that she must file a missing person’s report, even though I knew that it wouldn’t necessarily make the police act.

The phone rang and rang. No answer and no answering machine on which to leave a message. Perhaps I had misdialled. I tried again, more slowly. Still no response. It was strange because Emiko never strayed from the farm and, at this hour, should be preparing supper for her husband and children. The uneasiness that had been ebbing and flowing within me all day surged. I would have to try again later, even if it meant calling after they’d gone to bed, I decided. I hoped I wouldn’t be out too late.

I pulled my red suit from the closet and raced for the lift.