

Five Million Yen: Chapter 38

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Paris, France: 3:30PM, Hotel Ritz, October 29, 1976

Inspector Paumé hung up the telephone. He looked at Dan Arris, who was staring out the window, shook his head and walked into the bathroom one more time to gaze upon the naked dead body of Claudia Monschaud.

-How could this happen to a beauty like her? Paumé asked himself.

The local prefecture forensic team was putting away their gear. The coroner motioned to the two men in white jumpsuits to put the body in the bag. Claudia's body was lifted onto the unzipped bag, the bag zipped up and put on a gurney.

-How many times do those guys handle a body like that? thought Paumé.

Paumé walked back into the living room.

-Are you staying here the night? he asked Arris.

Arris turned from looking out the window and watched the two men rolling the gurney carrying Claudia out the door of the hotel room.

-I have to entertain fifty clients tonight downstairs in the ballroom. I will stay here, though it will be difficult, replied Arris.

-Perhaps you should take a different room, offered Paumé.

-No, I would like to grieve here after I'm finished with my business.

-As you wish. In my experience it is not a good idea to stay where there has been a fatal accident. It could be psychologically traumatic.

-I suspect no other guest would like to stay the night here either with your logic, snapped Arris.

-Yes, you are correct. Here is my card. If you have special needs, please don't hesitate to call me, said Paumé with total aplomb.

-Let's not kid each other, Inspector. You know I had a career as a forger, you think I am up to something. I served my time, and I didn't like it then and I wouldn't like it now. You tried to compromise me through that idiot musician, Ben Clarone. I'm clean. I don't do forgery. I deal in legitimate art. You set Claudia up as a honey trap to get information about me from Clarone. She told me how Interpol offered her money for information about me.

Paumé cleared his throat.

-Now *you* want to offer me help? You are one sick puppy Inspector. Claudia, my late wife, was not about to fall for your trap. She revealed all about you and that scar-faced jerk in New York, Lieutenant Harold Smith. She was very prescient.

-Don't get hot under the collar, Arris. I only offered to help. It is not easy to have a spouse die in a foreign country, especially if that country is France. It is good to have influential friends. My offer of assistance still stands.

-My apologies, Inspector Paumé. I am distraught about Claudia's fatal accident. I would like to be alone. I have only a few hours before I must be a gracious host to potential clients.

-*Ben sûr*. Please accept *my* apologies Mr. Arris, you are the aggrieved party. I leave you now, but my offer still stands.

Paumé let himself out of the room. In the corridor, he saw the *Police judiciaire* officer investigating the accident. She was famous in Paris, and was known as Lady Sherlock Holmes. Her real name was Lily Rose. The criminals called her "Lady Two-Flowers." She was about as far from looking like a flower as one could get, a five-by-five that would make a toad beautiful. Her subordinates called her *Madame Bufo*. She was the shortest officer and the only woman

in the *Direction Centrale Police Judiciaire*. She was totally without *charme*.

-What do you think Paumé? Rose demanded.

-Murder? Accident? Hard to say, replied Paumé.

-Yes, a difficult situation. We will have to wait for the forensic report, said Rose.

-I've been on Arris's case for years. I received a telephone call from Orly police. Arris beat an American, Ben Clarone, with whom the victim was having an affair, earlier this afternoon before the accident. There might have been some friction between Arris and his wife, Claudia. Also, the bellman said that when he came to the victim's room to fetch some baggage, Claudia, who was with the musician, Ben Clarone, was fully made-up and wearing a Chanel suit, as if ready to leave. Hard to understand why she would be taking a shower after she was fully dressed to go out. Clarone left with the bellman without Claudia. Shortly thereafter, she telephoned her employer, Pan American Airlines. You've pumped me dry, Lily.

-I didn't even ask, Inspector, but thanks for the information.

-I just wanted to clear the air. INTERPOL and the New York City PD are investigating Clarone, Arris and some painter named Gringovitch. We think the three of them have a plot involving forgery of a major Russian artist. Arris served time for forgery and received a reduced sentence for acting as a mole forger for the KGB. Gringovitch is a native-born Soviet Russian, whose parents escaped Stalin. Who knows where his loyalties lie. Clarone is a boyhood friend of Gringovitch from Chicago. Smith in New York thinks Clarone is an unwitting partner in all this, but I have my doubts. He goes to hotels and people die.

-I like your cynicism, Paumé, but we will do our own investigation.

**New York City, Mid-Town North Police Station, 9:30 AM,
October 29, 1976**

Lieutenant Harold Smith hung up the phone. He had been standing, but now sat down at the desk. It was not his desk, but one he had to use since he had been reassigned. Normally, he was the lead investigator for art fraud and had his office downtown. Since a major corruption investigation of the NYPD, a dozen lieutenants had been fired or furloughed and now Smith was investigating murders, suicides and child beatings in the wilds of Manhattan's west side.

The call had been from an Inspector Paumé in Paris. Paumé was an INERPOL operative who worked in international fraud. Paumé called to let Smith know that the honey-trap he had worked for two years to establish was dead. Claudia Monschard, a Pan Am stewardess, and wife of the convicted art forger, Dan Arris, was dead in a shower in the Hotel Ritz in Paris. Monschard had filed for divorce after Arris was sent to Federal prison. At the urging of Smith, she pulled the petition and went to work for the NYPD and INTERPOL as a honey-trap. Smith was expecting an update from Monschard on Arris's operations since his release. Now Smith was back to square one.

Detective-Sergeant Claude Mulvihill strode up to Smith's desk.

-You look a little cantankerous Lieutenant, said Mulvihill.

-Could be. I just lost my best inside operative. Two years of hard work gone.

-What happened? Mulvihill asked.

-She died in an accident. Or more likely was murdered, replied Smith.

-Tough luck, Lieutenant.

-Thanks. Why is it every time that musician, Ben Clarone, stops at a hotel, someone dies? Smith asked of no one in particular.

-You mean that grease ball Clarone committed murder again?

-Come on, Claude. He didn't commit murder in New York and probably not in Paris, but he was the last person to see the victim alive. It was at the Ritz.

-Gotta give that Clarone credit. He went from an SRO flop in New York to the Hotel Ritz in Paris in a week. His taste in hotels has improved, big time.

-Very funny, Claude.

-Anyone else we know involved?

-Dan Arris, it is his wife who died, said Smith.

-Now I know. Arris could murder someone and sit down to a gourmet dinner with no remorse.

-True, but it took me two years to establish his wife, Claudia Monschard, as a honey-trap. The commissioner is not going to be happy to hear that 10 grand and two years have been lost. And you know what Mulvihill; we don't even know what painting they've forged. Worse, I have to fit that investigation into all the criminal crap of the west side.

Mulvihill, pushed some papers to the center of Smith's desk and put his big right ham on the cleared space.

-Didn't Arris cooperate with the Feds?

-Yes, but Arris is clever. He's not your run-of-the-mill forger. He builds layers and layers of complexity into his business dealings. I'm sure as a double-agent currency forger for us, he compromised not only FBI and Secret Service operatives, but probably KGB operatives as well. That he isn't the one dead in the shower of the Hotel Ritz, is a testament to his survival skills. He's got enough dirt on enough highly placed people to shield himself from the likes of common cops like us, or the *flics* in Paris. Before he was nabbed, his client list read like a who's who of VIP's in society and government.

-Sounds like Arris covers his ass pretty well, said Mulvihill.

-In spades.

Smith's phone rang.

-Lieutenant Smith. There was a long pause. Mulvihill could hear some French accented English.

- Paumé, again, whispered Smith to Mulvihill covering the mouthpiece with his hand.

-Yes, Smith said into the handset.

-Yes, Inspector.

-Yes, indeed.

-Oh, yes, she is the best, if a little difficult.

-Yes, I understand perfectly.

-No, I don't think that will be necessary.

-Where is Clarone, now?

-Nice?

-Ouch!

-In an hour?

-No, not Victor Taxi. Find a better operative, preferably French, who won't speak English, *but knows English*. Kapish?

-Yes.

-Thank you Inspector, but it is still morning in New York City.

-Ciao, inspector.

Smith quietly hung up the phone.

-Sounds like your friend Paumé.

-Yes. He gave me some interesting information.

-So tell me, groused Mulvihill.

Smith took a deep breath. If there were to be peace in the office, he would have to see if he could get some other assistant beside Mulvihill. There could be a conflict of personalities that would take more energy to manage than it was worth.

-Arris beat the bejesus out of Clarone in a taxi. Clarone arrived at Orly and needed a wheelchair. Clarone's also traveling under his own passport, not the forged Benjamin Adoyan passport.

-Serves that punk right. Wasn't Clarone bedding Arris's wife, Claudia?

-Probably, but I don't have lab proof of that. One's man's spunk looks the same as another's. We don't have any way to match the spooch to the man, even if the French police look for things like that.

-Well, Arris must have thought so. I hope he gave that punk a few good ones.

-Easy, Sergeant, you'll never make lieutenant talking like that.

-What other news did that frog have?

-Your good French friend from *Police judiciaire*, their version of the DA's office is on the case. Remember Madame Lily Rose?

-Christ, do I. That toad made my life hell when we were investigating the death of that French council in a Harlem brothel a few years back. Regular Sherlock Holmes, without Dr. Watson.

-Paumé says, the *flics* in Paris call her Madame Sherlock Holmes behind her back.

-I'm sure a few more things too, sniped Mulvihill.

Both men stared at the desktop as if it were a strange planet.

-What do you think of this Lieutenant?

-Think of what Mulvihill?

-You lost your honey-trap. What was her main purpose? Keeping tabs on Arris and his business associates.

-Yes, but she's out of the picture now, pun intended

Mulvihill didn't get the pun, but looked at Smith as if Smith had lost his marbles.

-So, continued Mulvihill, why don't we put a tail on Clarone and let him lead us where we need to go? He's in business with Arris and that painter Gringovitch. For sure they will be in contact with him. He delivered the paintings.

-One of the paintings, corrected Smith.

-Well, one. Arris will want to know the whereabouts of the other two, if in fact Paul Austerlitz's information is correct.

-We're way ahead of you, Claude. You heard me instruct Paumé to put a better tail on Clarone. We've switched from honey to music. Let's play on. I think I should go to France, if I can convince the suits upstairs to get me out of Hell's Kitchen.

-But Lieutenant, don't you have chemotherapy three times a week?

-Only two more weeks. I'm not done with this life yet, Mulvihill.

**Nice, France 5:30 PM, Isabella's Santizarre's Apartment,
Friday, October 29, 1976**

Isabella Santizarre put her drink down to answer the telephone.

-Allo?

-Dan Arris.

-One moment, I will take the call in my office. Please hold, instructed Isabella.

-Ida, I have an important call I must take in my office, she said to her grandmother. Could you please hang up this phone when I pick up the extension in my office? If you need to refresh your drink, all the fixings are in the kitchen

Isabella walked into her office and closed the door. She picked up the handset.

She heard Ida hang up the other extension.

-OK, Arris, what's so important you have to call me on a Friday evening? My grandmother and I are ready to leave for a skiing vacation tomorrow morning.

-Sorry to bother you, but I have some bad news.

-What bad news?

-Claudia fell in the shower and hit her head. She died shortly afterwards.

-NO!

-I'm afraid so, Isabella. I am distraught. I have to entertain fifty guests in an hour. I'm beside myself. I don't even know how to arrange for a burial, or where to bury her.

-Surely, someone in Paris can help you.

-Well, Inspector Paumé offered to help, but he's no friend.

-I can give you the name of a good lawyer, who can assist.

-I have lawyers, lots of lawyers. What I need is a new assistant.

-You mean in the Fine Arts business, or your forgery business? Isabella asked.

-No reason to be snide, my business is as clean as yours, Isabella. Let's not cast stones.

-I have a big rock with your name on it, Arris.

-Well, I might have an important Gringovitch painting with your name on it.

Isabella pulled the phone away from her mouth and took a big slug of whiskey.

-How big?

-A meter a side or more.

-Original, or one of your forgeries?

-I can have it delivered by the master himself, Anatoly Gringovitch. He only does originals.

-So, what do you want from me?

-Get Ben Clarone. Follow him. Find out what he's doing. He's staying at Villa Arson for three weeks or more. Your territory. I think he's double-crossing me. He was bedding Claudia and probably knows everything about me. She was never one for keeping her mouth shut. Enjoy yourself. Claudia told me Clarone was a very skillful lover.

-My pleasure Arris. Good night.

Nice Cote d'Azur Airport, France 7:30 PM, Friday, October 29, 1976

-Do you need a wheelchair, Mr. Clarone?

-No thank you. I have to do this by myself. Some people will be very upset if they see me in a wheelchair. But, you could arrange for someone to carry my musical instrument, if you would.

-We can arrange for a porter, but you will have to be last off the plane, said the flight attendant, a middle-aged woman of faded beauty, but gracious French manners.

-Time I have. It will be a long night for me in any case.

-I will arrange for a porter to assist you.

-Thank you, Madame.

The other passengers filed past Ben and down the stairs to the tarmac. When the last passenger had left, an Algerian man in his early forties arrived.

-Are you the passenger who needs assistance?

-Yes, replied, Ben. If you would carry my musical instrument, I would be most grateful.

Ben started to rise. The pain was intense. By sheer force of will he stood and slid out to the aisle. The porter unbuckled his instrument from the seat and followed Ben as he slowly descended the stairs to the tarmac.

-Did you perform in Nice about a year ago, asked the porter.

-Yes, I did, with my band *Pieces of Eight*

-You jammed with my father, Hadj Attar.

-Ah yes, said Ben with great enthusiasm. What a terrific musician. I love that man. You are blessed. Do you play?

-Yes, but not like my father. I have six children. I cannot be a musician in France. He had ten children, but he was a musician in Morocco. He was visiting my family when he joined you in music. He remembered that afternoon with fondness.

-Is he here in Nice?

-No, sadly he died peacefully last month.

-I am so sorry. Such an inventive improviser.

-Yes, he was a master musician.

The two entered the terminal. Ben looked at a small crowd of faces scanning the arriving passengers for their friends and family. To one side, stood Jean-Claude Lyon, the orchestra manager of the Monte Carlo Orchestra.

-Ah, there you are Ben, said Lyon coming up to Ben and shaking his hand. What happened to you?

-A little accident in the taxi going to Orly. Nothing serious. My mouth and fingers are all in perfect working order.

-Here, give me your backpack, said Jean-Claude.

Ben unshouldered his backpack and gave it to Jean-Claude. He was sore and stiff, but movement was becoming less painful. Movement was the key, keep moving.

-I have arranged the rental car. You will have to sign a few forms. You can follow me up to Villa Arson.

-What about my contrabass? We need to tip Bachir. His father played with *Pieces of Eight* last year at the Grand Parade de Jazz.

Bachir gave a winning smile. He was happy to put the contrabass case down at the rental counter.

-Here is ten francs for a luggage trolley, said Jean-Claude to Bachir. Would you be so kind as to get one for us?

-Yes, sir, but I don't need ten francs, porters get them free.

-Oh, yes, I forgot. Please meet us here.

Bachir left to retrieve a luggage trolley.

-So Ben, are you ready to meet Hausenstockmann tonight?

-Well, I would like to clean up, unpack and blow a few notes. You don't have the part with you do you?

-No, Hans is making changes. I fear he is making it more difficult. He made the part easier for Arno, but now that you are the soloist, he reverted to his original version where you will be a duo soloist standing in front of the orchestra with Serge Nobokolov. I'm afraid it is a finger buster that will require all your skills.

-Just what I need, a relaxing evening with a crazy Austrian composer.

-It's not so bad, Ben. Hans is happy you are performing. He is experienced. He knows the part is difficult and you will be sight-reading it tonight. He only wants to meet you and go over the part, so tomorrow you two can have a good long session.

Ben shook his head. It had all the makings of a disaster.

-I will need some time to prepare, protested Ben. When will I have time?

-Good question. I thought that rather than work with Hans in Monte Carlo, you could work at his temporary residence in Beaulieu-sur-Mer this weekend. Monday is a holiday, but Hans wants to work with you and Serge on Monday. Beaulieu-sur-Mer is closer to Nice and Serge Nobokolov, the bassist, is staying with Hans and his family.

-What is the name of the composition? Ben asked.

-*Constellations*. It is a long blow. The entire piece in all eight movements is about an hour and fifteen minutes. A real *tour de force* for contrabass clarinet and contrabass. Hans has added an electric bass part for Serge as well as string bass. Serge has had his part since March and says it is the hardest composition he has ever learned. He told me, he still doesn't have it in his fingers and bow.

-The young woman at the car rental counter asked: May I help you?

-Yes, replied Jean-Claude. Here is my reservation for Mr. Benjamin Clarone. It will be a month rental.

-Turning to Ben, he said, there is a recording contract still in the works. We hope to record *Constellations* the week after the concert. The Countess LaFarge-Montesquieu, has offered to underwrite the cost of the recording. Not inconsiderable considering the size of the orchestra.

-Suits me, but I'm worried that I won't have enough time to prepare. Serge is the most amazing bass player and if he is having troubles, I can't imagine what Hausenstockmann has in store for me.

-Ben, Ben. Don't worry. You will be a just fine.

-Excuse me gentlemen. Will Mr. Clarone initial here and sign here and here?

Ben signed and initialed where indicated. The girl gave him the keys.

-It is the white Volkswagen Golf parked directly across from the terminal in the first spot. There are many bicyclists in Nice and environs, so please exercise caution, especially on the small roads in the hills.

-Thank you and I will, replied Ben. I'm a cyclist.

-Do you wish me to accompany you to the car, Bachir asked.

-Of course. Jean-Claude, put my pack on the trolley, said Ben turning to Jean-Claude.

The three men left the terminal and walked to the rental car lot. It was already dark outside. When they arrived at the car, Bachir put the contrabass in the back. It just fit.

-Thank you Bachir. Here's a little something for you. My best to your family and the widow of your father. He was a great musician.

-Thank you. Where are you playing?

-I will perform with the Monte Carlo Orchestra November 12,13 and 14. If you call me, I will leave tickets for you. I am staying at Villa Arson.

-I know it well. My oldest daughter studies ceramics there.

The two men shook hands.

-May Allah be with you, said Bachir.

-Thank you my good friend. Shalom.

-Shalom.

-Do you know this man? Jean-Claude asked after Bachir was out of earshot.

-I performed with his late father, the master Jajouka musician Hadj Abdesalam Attar last year.

-You musicians travel in a small, but wide world.

-Yes, replied Ben. I hardly go a day without encountering someone I know who has some musical connection through work, teachers, or fellow musicians.

-I'm an orchestra manager of a major orchestra and I know thousands of musicians, yet I rarely encounter them outside of my work.

-We know each other by the common ground of music, not money, contracts and calendar.

-Touché, Ben. Get in the car and we'll drive to my parked car, then follow me to Villa Arson.

-Don't lose me.

To be continued.

