

THE CONTRACT BETWEEN A SPECTER AND A SERVANT

Michiru Fushino





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Michiru Fushino

Illustration by Aki Aoi



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Translation by Eriko Sugita

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Prologue

Chapter 1 The Color of the Air

Chapter 2 The Spirit Has Come

Chapter 3 As a Servant

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Epilogue

THE CONTRACT BETWEEN A SPECTER^{AND} A SERVANT

CHARACTERS

Masamichi Adachi

A young man who failed the college entrance exam twice. Masamichi is a gentle soul but shy and introverted. He agrees to *a contract* with Shino in exchange for his life.

Shino Tatsumi

An out-of-this-world beauty. Shino is a specter whose powers have been sealed away for many years. He is now passing as a human and runs an antique store.

Bougyoudou

The antique store that Shino operates.

Spirits reside within its wares.

PROLOGUE

Someone was calling his name.

Over and over, they were repeating his name.

That's...my name.

Still languidly immersed in shallow sleep, the specter, who had been called “Shino” for the past six months or so, clicked his tongue.

I have never considered that my name. Not that I remember. I am only called that because he began using it... That's all.

A specter like him didn't usually have a name.

That wasn't all. Most didn't even have anything like a family history or ancestors they could trace.

That was because specters didn't have ancestors who continued to exist from generation to generation, nor parents who celebrated the birth of their offspring and gave them a name, wishing them future happiness.

Specters were all born from the saprophagous stagnation that humans created but conveniently ignored. They were weak beings that fed on their own kind.

The strongest of specters had acquired power by preying on other life-forms and would continue to attack and eat their foes to become even stronger.

And among the specters that became so powerful that humans started fearing them, a rare few were named after the land where they were rooted.

Indeed, *he* had been one of them, great and proud.

People feared him terribly as the one who controlled the burial grounds—not that he was particular about whether he was considered a *he* or an *it*.

He enjoyed capturing humans who rambled and begged desperately to escape, tormenting them, and then eating them.

The horror of a person faced with death was as mouthwateringly sweet and delicious as their flesh and blood. The specter was absorbed in attacking and devouring them and then turning their lives into power for himself.

Whether the victim was an infant, a beautiful woman, a rugged man, or a senior who was almost at the end of their life, he took delight in enjoying his “meals” as he pleased.

Nothing in the world had scared him.

Not a single person in the world could even lay a finger on him, let alone defeat him.

Or so he’d thought...

...until one night, he came across that spiritual medium who was casually wandering around Toribeno with only a flute in hand.

That’s right. I had nothing to fear, and I still don’t. I am not in any way afraid, he told himself, squeezing his eyes shut and gritting his teeth.

“Shino? Where are you?”

He could still hear that spiritual medium calling him.

It was the voice of the man who had screwed him over that night, not by force or savagery but through his superior calm and scheming. The cool, somewhat lazy voice grated on the specter’s nerves more than it should have.

Shut up.

It annoyed the hell out of Shino, and he squeezed his closed eyes even tighter.

It was humiliating that he’d been defeated by a weak human being, but that wasn’t the worst of it.

When fighting someone, there was no such thing as a draw. Only victory or defeat existed.

If a specter won, they ate their opponent, and if they lost, their opponent ate

them.

All that existed was the simplest of trades: an exchange of lives.

That was the only type of game the specter knew, but the spiritual medium had smiled gently and told him that he would not kill him.

He had then reduced the demon's mighty power with a curse, trapped him in a human-shaped "vessel," bound it with the name *Shino*, and made him a *shikigami*, or *ceremonial god*.

But the specter had been known as an enemy that ate anyone who crossed his path, for which the people hated him.

Naturally, many opposed the idea of Tokifuyu, a man who belonged to the Bureau of Spiritual Mediums, making him a familiar. In fact, the spiritual medium named Tokifuyu Tatsumi had laughed when he told Shino that everyone was strongly against it.

However, contrary to his fragile appearance, Tokifuyu seemed to be a tough and flexible individual, which made sense when you thought about how he had fooled Shino into submission.

By making Shino, who had been wreaking havoc on the ancient capital, into his shikigami, Tokifuyu could now use the specter's mighty powers to protect the city.

It would be more beneficial to make the creature pay for his sins instead of merely slaughtering or sealing him somewhere with a curse. Tokifuyu had patiently explained such benefits to his reluctant superiors at the ministry and was finally allowed to keep Shino as his shikigami.

"But if you harm a human being even once...your destruction alone would be too small a price to pay, and I will also be forced to take responsibility. My hands and feet will probably be cut off and buried in the ground as a foundation to protect the capital," Tokifuyu said matter-of-factly with a laugh.

I don't understand him.

Still clinging insistently to his sleep, Shino tilted his head in confusion in his mind.

Why did Tokifuyu go so far as to risk his life to make him his shikigami?

Even six months after being forced to live under the same roof as Tokifuyu, he couldn't understand the medium at all.

Why is Tokifuyu so obsessed with me? Why has he locked me, a specter, in a vessel with a human form, and why does he treat me as if I were a human...?

These were questions that had crossed his mind hundreds of times since he had been made a familiar.

But no matter how hard he thought about it, he could not come up with an answer.

He had asked Tokifuyu, but the medium brushed him off with that cunning smile and never gave him answers.

Even when Shino tried to think calmly about the reasons he sought, Tokifuyu would call out his name in a funny sing-song voice, as if reciting a poem...

"Shino! Sheee-noooooo!"

Impatient, Shino snapped open his eyes and let out a loud, wild shout.

"Shut up!"

Then he heard a soft "Oh?" and the sound of scuffling clothes and the footsteps of someone coming out of the residence and into the garden.

Of course, it was Tokifuyu.

Eventually, Tokifuyu, dressed in hunting clothes, slowly walked toward the small storehouse and spotted Shino.

Holding one hand to his forehead to block the red light of the setting sun, Tokifuyu came under the eaves of the shingle roof, atop which Shino sat cross-legged.

"How dare you make your lord search all over the house, then shout at him to shut up, much less sit where you are and look down on your master?"

His words were harsh, but his tone was serene. He was already smiling as he peered up at Shino.

"What's wrong with looking down on you?" Shino spat back, then flung

himself off the roof.

He landed without a sound, crossed his arms in front of his master, and said arrogantly, “I’m taller than you in the first place. I always look down on you simply by standing on the ground. And in addition, you’re the one who forced this human vessel upon me, so you’re the one to blame.”

True enough, the “human vessel” that Tokifuyu had given Shino was that of a tall young man.

It wasn’t muscular, but it was lithe like a large cat, and Shino could move any way he wanted...though, of course, it was only to the extent that a human could move, but his movements were surprisingly smooth from his fingertips to his toes.

“That makes sense,” Tokifuyu said mildly and looked at Shino’s pouty face with amusement. “I may have taken away most of your power, but there are many people who still say it is dangerous to give you a male body and that I should give you a weaker vessel, such as that of a frail woman or a young child. But then it would be pointless to have turned you into a shikigami. I expect you to do a great deal of heavy lifting for me.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. I don’t wish to do any heavy lifting. I would rather be a frail woman or a young child if I didn’t have to work for you that way. Give me a different vessel this minute.”

Tokifuyu didn’t seem particularly offended by Shino’s arrogant attitude. All he did was exaggeratedly wave the hat that symbolized his noble court status.

“My, my. A weak specter such as a dust bunny would make a cute, faithful shikigami like a small bird or a puppy, but it is a great deal of work with an eloquent being like you. No wonder no one has tried it before.”

“Of course they haven’t. You have some nerve, attempting to use me as a servant, you mere mortal.”

“I, that mere mortal, defeated you, and you lost miserably. Shino, I did not know that you enjoyed belittling yourself. That is very humble of you.”

“What the—?!”

Tokifuyu spoke gently as always, but his words were quite harsh.

He had a way of suddenly flashing a blade he hid deep in his pocket like that.

Despite having been through this several times, Shino was again caught off guard, and he bit his lip in frustration.

“...Shut up. Anyway, what do you want, calling out to me insistently like that?”

Tokifuyu narrowed his already narrow eyes like crescent moons as he looked at Shino, who had clearly toned down his annoyance, and said, “I am the one who was called upon, but regardless. Go to the kitchen and start a fire, will you?”

“Why do I have to do something like that?” Shino retorted, looking sullen. “You have a woman in the kitchen to do the cooking. Let her do it.”

The “vessel” that Tokifuyu had given Shino was that of an adult male, albeit a young one. At any rate, the specter had been sealed in it and brought to human society only for a short period so far. He was just like an unruly, uncontrollable child going through a rebellious stage.

“Not anymore,” Tokifuyu said quietly. “She’s gone.”

Shino frowned.

“What? Again? She just started working here.”

“Since you came to my residence, my household staff have been leaving one by one because they’re afraid of you. I thought I had finally found someone new, but she was gone this morning.”

“Humph,” Shino snorted. “It serves you right. It seems to have slipped your mind, Tokifuyu, but humans tend to fear specters. A spiritual medium, the lowest of humans that you are, should not have tried to make a specter like me into a shikigami...”

“I thought I just told you that the very same lowly spiritual medium captured you.”

“Shut up! Will you ever shut that mouth of yours?!”

“I think the same goes for you, but anyway, go into the kitchen and start the

fire. Fortunately, we will have a full moon tonight. Let us gaze at the beautiful moon, drink sake, and eat sweetfish together.”

“Sweetfish?”

Seeing a spark of interest light up in Shino’s eyes, Tokifuyu shaped his hands in the form of a large sweetfish and showed it to him.

“Yes, sweetfish. A friend of mine was concerned about me living in a neglected house with a man-eating specter and had fine sake and plump, delicious-looking sweetfish delivered to me. Sweetfish is your favorite food, is it not?”

Shino wrinkled his shapely nose like an angry dog, and his beautiful face took on the expression of a beast.

“I will eat the sweetfish. But what is a ‘friend’? A human?”

Posed with this fundamental question, Tokifuyu, who had been calm and collected, looked slightly confused. “In this case, he’s a human, but... You sometimes ask the simplest questions that I might expect from a child, and they are, therefore, difficult to answer.”

“Oh? Don’t you even know the meaning of something that you said yourself?” Shino sneered at Tokifuyu as if to say he couldn’t care less how he acted before his master.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t answer your question. I only said it is difficult to answer. But...yes, there are various types of friends. Some friends see each other on a daily basis but hate one another in their hearts, and some always have a place in their hearts for the other, even if they don’t meet for decades.”

The wrinkles around Shino’s nose became deeper. He looked so ferocious that if he had been a dog, he would dig his teeth into Tokifuyu’s throat any minute.

“How silly.”

“Humans are like that. We have complicated relationships with others. You’ll understand that someday. But...the friend who gave me the sweetfish is one of the few friends I can truly count on. Oh, but that isn’t quite accurate. I should have been honest and said he is the sole friend whom I can genuinely trust.”

“You live in the capital among many humans, and yet you can only trust one individual?”

Tokifuyu nodded vaguely, a sad smile creeping across his smooth face, looking somewhat like a Noh mask.

“I feel somewhat empty when you put it that way, but you’re right. However, Shino, it’s a great blessing to have a friend in the world whom you can believe in, even if it is only one person. You will see that someday.”

“As if,” Shino said grimly. “I’m not the least bit interested in humans acting familiar with one another.”

“The bonds of true friendship are not only acting familiar with one another,” Tokifuyu said as if reasoning with a child. “If someday...it might be at all possible, I hope that instead of calling each other master and servant, we will one day be able to refer to each other as a friend.”

“Hey, don’t get carried away, human! A day like that will never come!”

“Never... Mmm.”

Shino was awakened by the sound of his own voice.

The room was dark; it had the same familiar scent of the old house that it was in, and Shino felt the texture of the cotton duvet that he liked...

There was no doubt about it. He was lying under the covers in his room at Bougyoudou.

He turned to the side a little and saw his ancient alarm clock showing that it was thirty-four minutes past one in the morning.

I was dreaming...of those long-ago days.

Specters didn’t need to sleep every night.

But it wasn’t a bad idea to rest, and Shino was rather fond of lying on his mattress.

While he was awake, he had to support this annoying vessel of a human shell that his master, Tokifuyu, had forced upon him a thousand years ago and make efforts to enable it to function, but once he lay on his mattress, he could let

himself go.

When he could fly as high and as far in the sky as he wanted without considering the constraints of gravity, it was like he'd regained his old sense of freedom, and it was a wonderful feeling.

Of course, he still couldn't escape the human vessel he was in, but it wasn't bad that he could enjoy that sense of freedom for just a little while.

But why am I dreaming about Tokifuyu now...? Oh...I get it.

Shino glanced to his side.

He looked at the small man who was sleeping under the same duvet, shrinking into a ball like a cat that didn't belong there.

He was a weak human male whom Shino, Tokifuyu's servant, had made his own servant.

The man slept in a humble position, but his breathing was awfully relaxed. That was how Masamichi Adachi was...with a faint, pale, golden light radiating from his entire body.

It was what modern humans seemed to call an aura, a small outpouring of chi—the energy of life that humans possessed.

It wasn't very visible to the human eye, but a specter like Shino could clearly see the color of each human's chi.

Masamichi's golden chi was very unusual, and Shino had only known one other human with the same color of chi during the past thousand years or so.

Tokifuyu.

So...that's why I dreamed of Tokifuyu—because I had this guy's chi next to me. Yes. That's all there is to it.

I am not, by any means, feeling sentimental.

Grumbling bitterly to himself without making a sound, Shino turned away from Masamichi...or rather, Masamichi's chi. It was the same color as his late master's, and it reminded him of the sunlight that filtered through the trees. Then he closed his eyes once more.

CHAPTER 1

The Color of the Air

“Hmm,” the person facing him across the office desk said softly and nodded a bit.

Masamichi Adachi was tense, and his gaze was glued to the floor as he silently waited for the man’s next words.

Masamichi rested his hands on his thighs, and he could feel the damp sweat forming on his palms.

He was thirsty, but he didn’t have the nerve to pull out a drink from the bag at his feet while he was sitting alone with the older man.

He wished the man would hurry up and say something. Something nice, if possible.

But no matter how long he waited, the man said nothing.

An uncomfortable silence fell in the too-large room.

Masamichi was curious about the expression on the man’s face, but he didn’t dare meet his eyes. Instead, he turned his gaze toward the large window, seeking an escape.

Even with the windows closed, he could hear the cicadas chirping noisily in the trees outside.

It was a little chilly inside with the air conditioner on, but he could guess the outside temperature from the intensity of the sunlight.

He hadn’t realized that it was already mid-July.

The long rainy season had finally ended the week before, and huge cumulonimbus clouds had been floating in the blue sky every day for the past few days.

Four months have already passed since that day... The day I met Shino.

Time had flown by as he tried to adapt to his rapidly changing circumstances.

The realization was accompanied by a touch of vertigo.

One night in early spring, Masamichi had been the victim of a hit-and-run accident and was lying on the ground near death when he was saved by a *specter* that appeared in the form of a beautiful human man.

With a mysterious power, Shino had stitched Masamichi's totally battered body back together, and the young man had survived.

However, he had not simply been saved.

Masamichi became the servant of the specter called Shino Tatsumi, and he agreed to do something unbelievable: He would dedicate himself, body and soul, to the specter.

Since then, he had moved in with Shino—his master.

He slept in a second-floor room above Bougyoudou—a small antique store that Shino operated—and did as he said...which may sound as if he was at Shino's beck and call, working like a dog, but that wasn't the case.

It was more accurate to say that Shino was now taking care of all of Masamichi's needs.

Masamichi had previously lived in an old apartment to avoid burdening his parents financially. While studying on his own, he had barely managed to make ends meet by working part-time, but his life changed dramatically after he became Shino's servant.

Shino's house was older than Masamichi's previous apartment, but here, the young man was guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter, plus an environment and the time to devote to his studies. Not only that, but Shino even paid for his tutoring fees.

Shino was more serious and studious than one might expect from a specter, and the man seemed to welcome his servant's desire to study.

Of course, beyond his studies, Masamichi was searching for ways to contribute to his life and job at *Bougyoudou*. However, Shino could basically do

everything himself and ran a very specific business, which meant that there was only so much that Masamichi could accomplish.

What exactly did Shino do for a living, you may ask...?

“Ahem.”

In an attempt to ease his nerves, Masamichi had let his mind wander, wondering what Shino was doing at the store, but he was jolted back to the present when the man seated across from him cleared his throat.

He was in an interview room at his prep school.

The school took excellent care of its students, holding meetings between students and faculty at the end of each month. At these meetings, the students were evaluated on their current academic performance, and adjustments were made to their plans for taking college entrance exams; they received advice on studying, and discussed personal matters.

The person sitting in front of Masamichi was an older man named Mr. Takanashi. He looked to be at least sixty and had been in charge of all of Masamichi’s meetings since he first enrolled at the school in April.

The man didn’t talk about himself much. Still, when he learned that Masamichi was from Akita, in northern Japan, he had smiled and said he was from neighboring Aomori, where he had taught junior high school for about thirty years. He admitted that while it probably wasn’t right to generalize, the two prefectures probably had things in common, and it brought back memories.

Since then, the man had continued to be friendly with him, but Masamichi still felt nervous, no matter how many interviews he had.

“I see that you’re working very hard.” These were Mr. Takanashi’s first words when he saw Masamichi’s pale face.

He looked and sounded friendly, but his words were vague, and Masamichi couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Unsure how to react, Masamichi just tilted his head in confusion.

The sheet of paper before him had a graph on it that showed the results from all the tests and quizzes he’d taken and the scores he’d gotten in his practice

exams since he started studying at the prep school.

Mr. Takanashi had more documents in front of him, and Masamichi figured they included various data that went beyond his grades.

“I’m trying...to work hard.”

Masamichi looked at the grade transcript before him, and his shoulders sagged.

He was already in his second year of trying to get into college after failing his entrance exam twice.

Perhaps his self-studying methods had been wrong.

His secret desire was to learn the “correct” approaches at this cram school... and dramatically improve his grades in the process.

For a pessimist like him, it was an unusually optimistic and desperate aspiration, but life wasn’t so easy that he would simply get his wish.

Masamichi glanced at his past tests and saw that his grades were mostly unchanged, or maybe just slightly better, depending on how you looked at it.

However, Mr. Takanashi put on his reading glasses, looked at Masamichi’s report card, and smiled, saying, “You’re working hard.” His gentle smile reminded Masamichi of his grandfather, and he felt a pang in his chest.

“I may be working hard, but if I don’t produce results, it’s meaningless, isn’t it...?”

“Well, of course. And our job is to help you students get into college,” Mr. Takanashi said simply as Masamichi trailed off and his head drooped.

“Right. Sorry. I don’t know what the problem is. I mean, my brain has to be the problem...”

“Oh, there, there, don’t be negative. Your brain is fine.”

Mr. Takanashi hurried to console Masamichi, but in his state, the young man couldn’t hear the man’s reassurances.

“I can’t think of any other reason why I can’t do better. I... Uh, this is my first time coming to a prep school.”

“That’s what you told me at your first interview, that you’d been studying on your own until you came here.”

Masamichi nodded.

“I learn a lot from you and the other teachers here, and there’s so much that I didn’t know. I wonder what I’ve been doing all this time, and I sometimes get depressed, but the classes are a lot of fun. I’m prepping and reviewing as much as I can, so it isn’t as if I’m being lazy and not studying. Though, if you ask me if I study from the moment I get up in the morning until I go to bed at night, I can’t honestly say I do.”

“Everyone is like that. I don’t think you’re being lazy, though I’m just your counselor and haven’t taught any of your classes... We don’t usually show this information to our students, but you can take a quick look.”

Laughing and making his thin eyes even thinner as they seemed to disappear deep behind his laugh lines, Mr. Takanashi pulled out a piece of paper from his files and placed it in front of Masamichi.

It was a document of assessments his instructors had provided on his attitude during his classes.

HE’S SERIOUS. HE DOESN’T SIT IN THE FRONT ROW BUT USUALLY TAKES POSITION IN THE SECOND OR THIRD ROW BY THE WINDOW.

HE ALWAYS TAKES NOTES.

HE NEVER DOZES OFF.

PERHAPS HE’S TOO SHY TO ASK QUESTIONS DURING CLASS. HE OFTEN COMES TO ME DURING BREAKS.

Masamichi’s puppylike eyes went back and forth across the report as he sat in amazement.

There are dozens of students in each class, but the teachers really watch us.

“See? Everyone knows how conscientious you are. The only thing is...”

“Yes?”

“Look at this.”

Mr. Takanashi pointed to one of the comments at the bottom with his slightly bent index finger, and Masamichi took a peek.

HE'S COMPLETELY SERIOUS FROM START TO FINISH. HUMAN CONCENTRATION HAS ITS LIMITS, SO NATURALLY, HE'S CLEARLY EXHAUSTED AT THE END OF CLASS. THIS LACK OF PACING MAY BE THE REASON WHY HIS IMPROVEMENTS ARE STAGNATING.

Masamichi let out a small yelp.

Mr. Takanashi pulled the documents toward him, crossed his fingers on top of them, and said to Masamichi, who was stunned, "Our instructors are seasoned professionals. They see different students each year and are aware of both their good traits and the problematic ones. I think you were aware of this habit of yours, weren't you?"

Masamichi nodded.

"I know that I can't pace myself. People have been telling me that since I was young."

"Is that so? Like when, for example?"

Masamichi looked at nothing in particular before answering, "There were several subjects I didn't do well in during exams at junior high and high school, and I was called to the faculty office to talk to my teachers. Those were the times they pointed it out to me."

"Uh-huh."

"Instead of setting a target within the scope of a particular exam, I'd study like crazy until the last minute. And then I'd get stuck when something came up that I didn't understand."

"Oh, that isn't good."

Masamichi shook his head.

"So I started studying for exams earlier on, but once exam time approached, I'd forget what I learned at the beginning and start over..."

"And then it's time for your exams before you can restudy everything."

“R-right. I’ve been taught here how to find the most important points and then extract and study them, which I try to do, but it isn’t easy. I feel anxious if I don’t go over everything from the beginning.”

For the first time during the meeting, Mr. Takanashi looked somewhat troubled as he leaned back a little and crossed his arms.

“A leopard can’t change its spots. Hmmm, you’re going to need to make a bold change in your mindset and behavior. Let’s talk with your teachers to see if they can think of a good way to support you.”

“...Th-thanks.”

“But if you know your weaknesses, you have to keep working at improving. Even if you think something’s impossible, if you keep it up, you can sometimes suddenly find that you’re able to do it. That miraculous moment will never come if you give up.”

“O-okay...”

“Make a habit of always thinking about what’s important to you and where you should prioritize your efforts. That doesn’t just apply to your academic studies. I can’t say you have all the time in the world, but it doesn’t help to rush things.”

Mr. Takanashi drew his materials together and thumped them against the desk. He must have seen this as a good time to end the interview, looking satisfied.

“Is there anything else you want to talk about?”

Feeling sorry for bogging Mr. Takanashi down with his woes, Masamichi worked up his courage and said in a soft voice, “Well, there *is*...a little something I wanted your opinion on.”

It was past six PM when Masamichi returned to Bougyoudou.

After his interview, the study room, which was usually crowded with students, had been empty, so he’d sat in his favorite seat and studied for a while.

His current home, Bougyoudou, was located in a quiet residential area. He had been given a small room of his own, but a study space designed specifically

for learning was a great place to focus.

He found that he could calm his restlessness by working on the lists of questions in his English textbook.

Bougyoudou is an important place where Shino works, so it wouldn't be good if I went home agitated.

Standing in front of Bougyoudou's door, Masamichi pulled out a towel from his bag and vigorously wiped his sweaty face and neck.

It was still light outside, and the temperature had not dropped much from midday.

He was dressed casually in a T-shirt, jogger pants, and sandals, but it was still hot. Just walking for a few minutes from his prep school to the train station across the street made heat build up inside his body.

He glanced at this month's antique display in the store's small bay window. It was a glass vessel with legs that made it look like an unusual wineglass...but it wasn't.

It was a glass for holding ice.

The legs were a clear blue, the funnel-shaped glass translucent and colorless, and the smooth rim was a soft pink.

According to Shino, it was an everyday utensil used by commoners between the Meiji and the beginning of the Showa era, mainly for eating shaved ice.

It seemed a bit too small for use today, but Masamichi imagined that ice must have been valuable in the old days, when refrigerators and freezing technology hadn't been what they were in modern times.

The bay window served as a showcase, and every month, Shino displayed seasonal items for passersby.

Not that Shino wanted to attract customers. He was only continuing a custom that his predecessor had practiced.

Still, a surprisingly large number of people stopped to take a look as they passed by, and Masamichi, who was supposed to be a live-in clerk, looked forward to finding out what would be displayed each month.

“Ice, huh? That’s exactly what I’m in the mood for,” Masamichi mumbled, then opened the heavy wooden door, and the Nambu ironware tongs attached above the door made a cool sound as they clattered against each another.

“I’m home,” Masamichi called out as usual and stepped inside.

Anyone visiting Bougyoudou for the first time was guaranteed to be stunned by its interior. They took one step into the store and would freeze, and no small number of them turned on their heels and ran.

First, it was dark.

It wasn’t surprising at this hour since the sun was about to go down, but it was *always* dark.

Perhaps to protect the old items from the sun, the windows were few and small. And lights hung from the ceiling, likely for appearance because Shino didn’t bother to turn them on.

The interior was dusty, with the distinctive smell of old things wafting in the air.

What was most significant was the mountain after mountain of old items that filled the store, making the space shadowy and cramped.

Mountains wasn’t an exaggeration.

Only the center of the old brick floor was visible, because things were piled up in a precarious balance on either side of the aisle so tightly that they were packed from the floor to the ceiling and against the walls. There was barely enough room for one adult to pass through.

One could experience a thrill similar to an attraction at a theme park simply by walking toward the back of the store, wary of the wobbling items that threatened to fall on top of visitors.

Masamichi had been intimidated when he first went down the aisle, but then he’d gotten used to it and could go through fairly quickly, careful not to bump into any of the objects.

At the far end of the aisle, in the back of the store area, was a long desk with an old-fashioned cash register, probably from the Showa era. Here, the owner,

Shino, dealt with customers.

But on this day, Shino was farther back in a tea room where the floor was elevated higher than the store area.

It was a traditional Japanese-style room about the size of ten tatami mats, with a round, sturdy table and other small pieces of furniture.

Shino was sitting cross-legged on a thick cushion and seemed to be working on something at the table.

He acted like he was unaware of Masamichi's return, but that couldn't be. Specters had far more acute senses than regular human beings.

Shino could probably hear the sound of a needle dropping on the mat.

But he wasn't ignoring Masamichi.

He just didn't see a need to respond to Masamichi's return to Bougyoudou, which made it seem as if he was ignoring him.

Masamichi had gradually started to understand Shino's way of thinking, which was perhaps unique to specters.

As long as he knew that Shino meant no harm, it didn't bother him. Masamichi was quite accepting of Shino's idiosyncrasies.

Masamichi removed his shoes, went up to the living area, and said again, "I'm home." Then, as it was dark in this area as well, he turned on the light.

Like the house, the pendant light above the table was a classic of the Showa era and illuminated the room in a warm, milky hue.

Finally, Shino stopped working and looked up at Masamichi.

"Hi, I'm home. I know you can see well enough without the light, but, Shino... it's already dusk, and I can't see in the dark."

Shino glanced at Masamichi with his signature blank expression—or rather, his standard frown—and went back to working without a word.

"What are you doing?"

Masamichi expected to be ignored again, but Shino answered bluntly, "It should be obvious. I'm taking apart a couple of chains."

“Chains? Oh, I see!” Masamichi clapped his hands in acknowledgment.

Shino was trying to unravel a jumbled-up metal chain.

They were so tangled that Masamichi couldn't guess how they had gotten that way, and a number of knots had formed along the long, thin, golden chain.

“Is it a necklace? What happened?”

Shino answered, with irritation on his face, “It was in a small chest I brought here. I haven't decided what to do with the chain yet, but at any rate, I can't leave it tangled.”

“I know that feeling. Hey, were you trying to do that with your bare hands?”

“How else?”

“Uh...can I give it a try?”

“Suit yourself.”

Apparently, Shino had been getting tired of trying to undo the knots, so he passed the jumble to Masamichi without complaint.

“Mmmm...”

Masamichi touched the necklace with trepidation.

It was a rather delicate chain, with the stamp 18K on the metal fittings.

Fortunately, it didn't appear broken anywhere, but undoing the knots, which looked like dumplings, was something of a challenge.

Masamichi noticed that each of the dumplings was small and tight as he glanced at Shino's grim yet beautiful face.

“Shino, did you pull the chain a lot?”

Masamichi didn't mean to blame his master, but he seemed to have been right on target. As if to deny it, Shino turned away, sulking like a child.

He pulled it for sure! But considering his specter strength, he must have gone pretty easy on it. I mean, with his power, he could have easily torn this chain to pieces.

He'd thought that Shino could do anything, but apparently, that wasn't the

case. Masamichi was filled with amusement as he reached for a container of toothpicks on the table.

Shino seemed intrigued by the movement and turned around.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“I think this might just do the trick,” the young man said as he pulled out two average toothpicks.

He began tapping the rounded end of one of them against a tight knot.

The continuous tapping loosened the knot a fraction, and then he slipped the pointed end into a gap created in the knot. Patiently and very carefully, he used the other toothpick for support, either pulling or holding the chain in place, and untangled the knots one by one.

“Huh. So you can use the tip of a toothpick for more precise movements than the fingertips.”

“Yep.”

For just a moment, Masamichi glanced at Shino with a look that was one part pride and nine parts shyness, then returned his attention to the task at hand.

“But I’m not the one who came up with the idea,” he said. “I remember my mom fixing one for my grandmother once. Her necklace got tangled up like this, and with her failing eyesight, she made it worse by trying to undo the knots. Then Mom used toothpicks, and voilà.”

“Ah. So it’s a habit of humans to get their chains entangled, is it?”

“Not exactly, but Mom said you had to help a necklace look pretty again because if you left it abandoned, it would start playing on its own and get tangled up,” Masamichi said, sharing his mom’s joke.

But Shino responded with a serious look on his face.

“So your mother’s chain was an artifact spirit.”

“Oh, no, no.”

Patiently continuing to undo the double and triple knots in the chain, Masamichi couldn’t help laughing.

In contrast, deep creases appeared between Shino's brows.

"You dare laugh at your master?"

"I'm not laughing at you. I didn't expect you to suddenly refer to my grandma's necklace as an artifact spirit. Mom was only joking about the necklace playing on its own."

Masamichi then turned his attention to the store area he had walked through a moment earlier.

He could see the mountains of items thanks to the soft light he'd turned on in the tea room. There were vintage antiques, old tools, and so forth, which would have been categorized by value or when they were made.

There was one thing the thoughtlessly piled-up items had in common: Almost everything in the store was an *artifact spirit*.

Items made and used by humans for many years developed a soul. They became a type of spirit, and Shino said those with a life and will were called *artifact spirits*.

Masamichi couldn't quite believe it when Shino first explained that, but he was totally convinced when he'd tried to clean the store, angered the artifact spirits, and ended up almost dying.

Even now, Masamichi could sense their curious gazes as he spoke with Shino.

They didn't worry him at the moment, since he had no negative feelings toward them. Still, he felt like an actor standing in the elevated tea room, which seemed like a platform on which he performed and the silent spirits watched.

"But...yeah, now that I think about it, maybe it wasn't just a joke. Maybe Mom's words were an expression of her desire to treat things with care. Hey, is this necklace an artifact spirit?" Masamichi asked, thinking about his mother, but Shino denied it.

"No, it isn't. But jewelry harbors and accumulates human greed, obsession, and vanity. There should be various ways to use it."

"Oh? I wouldn't know since I don't wear jewelry."

"People generally wear it to make themselves look good," Shino said with

certainty, and Masamichi tilted his head.

“Hmmm, maybe you’re right, but I think there are also other reasons why people do it. Maybe it’s important, like an item they received to commemorate some special event, or it could be a memento of someone.”

However, Shino retorted bluntly, “That’s a type of obsession, but with *someone*.”

“...Oh, I see. I guess a piece of jewelry is certainly an item that could be filled with thoughts of something or someone. Hey, I think I’ve made a breakthrough,” Masamichi said cheerfully as he continued to fiddle with the toothpicks.

“Humph. I didn’t know you were good at working steadily at something like that. I’m a little impressed.”

Specters didn’t lie, and they didn’t flatter people. When Shino said he was impressed, that was exactly what he meant.

Masamichi blushed slightly.

Shino may have only said he was a little impressed, but Masamichi’s heart beat faster with unexpected pleasure since the specter usually just praised him for the color of his chi and the taste of his flesh and blood.

“I-I’m not necessarily good at working steadily on a task, but I don’t mind doing something that I know will get somewhere if I keep at it.”

“That trait is the one thing you have going for you. Don’t neglect it.”

“‘The one thing’... Okay, I know you’re right, but you don’t have to point it out like that.”

Smiling wryly, Masamichi continued to work on the chain, and the necklace was soon restored to its original state.

“Here you go.”

Masamichi handed the necklace to Shino and grinned.

“Not to borrow my mom’s words, but it might get tangled again if you just leave it somewhere. Maybe you should hang it someplace, though it would be

best if you had a special box for it.”

“I’ll take your advice and hang it. By the way...,” Shino said, holding the necklace carefully with his fingers. Then he glared at Masamichi, who was startled and figured the time for praise was over. “You smell like sweat.”

“Gah!”

Masamichi stood up as if he had been kicked.

He usually showered as soon as he got home but had forgotten to do so today, having been absorbed in undoing the knots in the necklace, so he quickly apologized.

“Sorry. It was hot outside today. I know it bothers you since you have more acute senses than humans.”

“It doesn’t particularly bother me. Humans stank more a thousand years ago,” Shino replied curtly, whirling the necklace hooked around his fingers in the air.

“Oh...maybe that’s true.”

“But you usually have a very faint odor, and when you smell sweaty, it reminds me of a thousand years ago—how delicious the saltiness of human sweat had been when I brushed my mouth against their skin, like what you call salad dressing today...”

“Whoa!! Hold it! Stop right there!”

Masamichi panicked and waved his hands in the air when Shino’s gaze became distant and dreamy, reminiscing about the time when he had been a man-eater a thousand years ago.

“You are my servant, and you dare tell your master to shut up?”

“Sorry! Maybe it’s best not to remember those times too often. When you remember something that tasted good, you’ll want to eat it again, and I figure it’s the same for a specter. S-so anyway, I’ll go and take a shower now so I don’t remind you of anything else! I’ll be careful from here on out!”

Masamichi was already climbing the steep and narrow stairs as he spoke.

Shino stopped swinging the necklace as he watched Masamichi speed away as

fast as a rabbit and shrugged with a bored expression on his face.

“Humph. And here I was, thinking I might as well have a lick or maybe a nibble.”

Grumbling dangerous words to himself, Shino looked at the necklace around his fingers.

“Undoing those knots was quite a feat. I suppose it goes to show that every fool has his uses,” he mused.

When Masamichi returned downstairs feeling refreshed after taking a good, long shower, he was met with a pleasant aroma wafting into the tea room.

Shino was standing in the kitchen—sans apron as usual—cooking something in a frying pan.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Masamichi saw that it was already past seven. It was time for dinner.

Ever since Masamichi moved in, Shino had been cooking breakfast and dinner for him.

For a specter, human food wasn't as good a source of nutrition when compared with humans themselves. However, Shino, who had eaten three meals daily with the previous owner and his wife, still observed their dining habits.

“I'm sorry I didn't help you with dinner,” Masamichi said as he quickly walked barefoot into the kitchen, dressed casually in a T-shirt and shorts.

“No problem,” Shino responded without looking at him, then gestured with his chin toward the cupboard.

On top of the old wooden cupboard was a tray, which held small plates and bowls of food.

“Oh, I'll take these to the table.”

Although Masamichi was far from being in perfect sync with the specter, they had been living together for over four months, and he was learning to read the other man's subtle actions and eye movements. So Masamichi began setting the table without waiting for a response.

He wiped the tabletop clean, put a large folded placemat at each seat, and then proceeded with the tableware and chopsticks.

The large mats were ancient, like the rest of the place, covered here and there with spots and stains from food spilled by the previous owner. They couldn't be wiped off and would generally be called old stains, but Masamichi regarded them fondly as an accumulation of the warmth of someone's life.

Shino must have felt the same way, having taken the folded mats along with the other items he accepted from clients for his personal use.

Grilled eggplant, potherb mustard, fried young sardines, a salad of shredded yam and crumbled grilled seaweed, precooked ginger preserves, boiled green beans, and a carrot-and-cod-roe stir-fry—everything looks yummy.

Masamichi felt humbled to think that Shino had quickly prepared all these dishes while he'd been taking a leisurely shower. He grinned in anticipation as he looked at each delicacy.

"Hey," Shino called in a low voice.

"Coming!"

Masamichi rushed to the kitchen and saw that Shino was portioning the main dish for the evening: pork-and-ginger stir-fry.

The combination of ginger and soy sauce created a savory aroma that made Masamichi's mouth water.

Despite the name *pork-and-ginger stir-fry*, Shino didn't use thick meat and favored thinly sliced pork loin with plenty of onions and king oyster mushrooms, so it was more like a vegetable stir-fry that included meat.

The tart sauce, with lots of grated ginger, was light and went perfectly with the heaping bed of shredded cabbage it was served with.

"Yum. I love your ginger pork," Masamichi said, but Shino neither replied nor nodded and promptly began washing the frying pan.

Masamichi was a little sad that Shino wouldn't respond, but feeling that he shouldn't give up on telling the specter what he thought, he said, "I mean it," before carrying the food to the table.

Finally, as Masamichi was putting the lustrous, freshly cooked rice from the antique gas rice cooker into bowls, Shino opened the refrigerator.

“Did we need something else?”

Instead of answering, Shino placed two small glass bowls on a tray and brought them to the table.

Shino set one in front of Masamichi and the other in front of himself, then got down on his knees and sat cross-legged.

When Shino sat like that, it meant all the dinner contents were laid out on the table.

“Shino, thank you for making dinner again. Let’s dig in.”

When they first began living together, Shino used to tell Masamichi that there was no need to thank him before each meal. Still, Masamichi never stopped expressing his appreciation, and the specter seemed to have gotten tired of repeating himself.

He didn’t say anything in particular anymore, although the grumpy look on his face remained unchanged.

Shino never said anything before or after a meal, and that wasn’t all. He didn’t say good morning, hello, or good evening; he didn’t announce that he was home; and the list went on. Masamichi was satisfied to realize that specters didn’t have a habit of greeting one another.

Masamichi grew up being told by his parents and grandparents to always say hello and thank you since it didn’t cost anything to say those words. It had become an ingrained habit, and the words came out of his mouth naturally, but Shino seemed to consider them completely meaningless.

Shino’s pretty flexible and adjusts to modern Japan in terms of hairstyle and fashion, but he’s also stubborn in a strange way.

Pondering the specter’s peculiarities, Masamichi picked up his chopsticks.

His appetite had been waning over the past few days as he worried about his prep school interview, but now that it was over, he could fully enjoy his meal.

Then before Masamichi could take his first bite, Shino blurted, “Start with the

soup.”

Masamichi was a little surprised, since Shino didn’t usually specify the order in which he should eat, but he put down his chopsticks and looked around the table.

“The soup? Oh, this one? The dish you brought? Ooh, it’s cold.”

The glass bowls that Shino had taken out of the fridge contained an ample amount of something whitish that appeared to be a soup.

The bowl fit neatly in the palm of Masamichi’s hand and was cool to the touch.

“Oh, it’s a cold soup, huh? It looks good. You’re right; we should eat this while it’s cold.”

Masamichi picked up a wooden spoon and took a sip.

It was smooth and a little thick, with a refreshing flavor and the pleasant taste of potatoes, probably seasoned with salt and pepper. The subtle, elegant aroma of bay leaves wafted from the soup.

Masamichi first moved the small, round leaf floating in the soup to the side, took another spoonful, and then another, before looking at Shino.

“This is great! It’s called vichyssoise, right?”

“I know of no such name,” Shino replied with no feeling at all as he sipped his soup directly from the bowl.

Astounded, Masamichi said, “But you made it, didn’t you?”

Then with a bored look on his face, Shino mumbled, “It’s a very cold one-potato, two-potato soup.”

“Huh?!”

Shino’s words were quite a mismatch to his beautifully carved face and deep voice.

“Shino... What did you say?”

“I said, it’s a very cold one-potato, two-potato soup,” Shino said, glaring at Masamichi, who looked stunned. “That’s what I’ve been told. Yoriko often

made it in the summer. It was one of her specialties.”

“...Oh, I see!”

It finally made sense, and Masamichi took a good look at what was left of his soup.

Yoriko was the wife of the late storekeeper, Daizo.

The elderly couple had encountered Shino by chance, taken care of him like he was their own son, and left the store to him. Even Shino seemed fond of the pair.

When Masamichi first met Shino, he noticed how the specter’s facial expressions and tone of voice softened when he talked about them.

Even now, a faint smile—which was a rarity—appeared on Shino’s face as he stared at the bowl he held.

“I made it a rule to serve this soup in these bowls.”

“They’re pretty. A nice, pale-green color.”

“I understand it’s called Hagi glassware. Yoriko always brought these out of the cupboard when she made this soup. She had me help her, telling me to pass down the flavors of our family cooking for generations to come.”

“How do you prepare it? I get that you use potatoes, but what else does it have in it?”

“Normally, she used regular onions and green onions, but when she made this soup, she took the trouble of going out and buying leeks.”

“Leeks?! Oh, those fat green onions. Wow, that’s cool. I’ve never bought them.”

Shino nodded and slurped some more soup.

“Yoriko would heat oil and chopped leeks in a skillet until they began sweating a lot, which meant cooking them well until they released moisture.”

“That sounds logical...!”

“Next, add diced potatoes, cook, then simmer in chicken broth, and add one bay leaf.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Remove the bay leaf when the ingredients are tender, add milk, pour into a blender, and puree. Then it’s just a matter of cooling it in the refrigerator. Yoriko topped it off with another bay leaf as a finishing touch.”

“It’s cute, like a lotus leaf. How about this leaf here?”

“That’s a garden nasturtium. Yoriko grew them in a planter in the garden. I took a look outside this afternoon, saw they were growing again from spilled seeds, and picked a few small, young leaves to float on top of the soup.”

“Huh. Nasturtium, huh...? I’ve never had it. Oh, it has a sharp zing to it.”

“She said it’s a good contrast against the mild flavor of the soup, particularly in the summer.”

“I see. Yoriko must have been a great cook. You told me before that most of the dishes you make are recipes she taught you, right?”

Shino nodded.

“She didn’t teach me any recipes so much as show me how to cook, and I memorized it.”

“Okay. You told me before that you had her give you instructions when she became physically disabled.”

“That’s right. She wasn’t even my master, but she sat on the stool in the kitchen and ordered me around.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I never met her, but I can imagine what she was like.”

“Don’t.”

Shino finished his soup, held his empty bowl with both hands, looked at it, and said in a nostalgic tone, “When I first decided to stay at this house, Yoriko told me to help her prepare the dried sardines to use as soup stock.”

Although he was stingy with words, Shino sometimes told him old stories like that when the mood struck. Masamichi loved it, and he leaned forward, hoping to hear more.

“You mean like removing the gills from the head of a fish or tearing out the

innards? I often helped my grandmother do stuff like that. I'd forgotten about it since my mom uses instant soup stock."

Shino blinked and nodded when Masamichi made a gesture of removing the guts of a dried fish.

"I threw a tantrum then, saying it was absurd and a waste of time to process such tiny fish one at a time. I said it was meaningless," Shino admitted.

Recalling the earlier incident with the necklace, Masamichi held back his laughter and thought, *Shino's calm and collected, making me think that he'd be good at tasks that require a lot of patience, but he's actually pretty useless when it comes to minute details because he has a short fuse.*

Oblivious to Masamichi's musings, Shino continued to speak matter-of-factly. "Then Yoriko made two types of soup stock and told me to taste them: one made with dried sardines that'd been properly processed and the other without that extra step. Indeed, they tasted different."

"She went out of her way to have you taste them for yourself. How were they different?"

"The broth from the unprocessed dried fish tasted cluttered. The other was clear."

"Was the clear broth tastier?"

Shino thought about that for a moment and then said with a serious face:

"It seemed more likable than tasty."

"Likable...? You mean you liked it better?"

"Yes. Sometimes, a coarse taste isn't necessarily bad, because it adds depth to the flavor, but it was mostly fishy then."

"Oh, I get it!"

Masamichi was about to expand on that, but the other man continued to speak with a serious look on his face.

"The smell of dried fish guts was offensive to me. It reminded me of the stench of corpse meat that I had devoured a thousand years ago when I was still

a weak specter.”

“Urk!”

“I didn’t have a choice back then and ate anything I could get my hands on so I could survive. But that’s different now. The raw smell of fresh human flesh and blood is rather nice, but...”

“Stop right there. I’m saying this for the second time today, but let’s avoid that subject.”

Glad he didn’t automatically say “yeah” without thinking, Masamichi quickly picked up his chopsticks again.

“Um, let’s not spoil our dinner. Why don’t we talk about the flavors we’re enjoying now?”

“...Hmph.”

Shino seemed offended by Masamichi’s interruption.

But because his late master had put a curse on him that forbade him from eating humans, it wasn’t in his best interest to think about the *fine delicacies* that he could no longer enjoy.

He took a huge bite of the pork and ginger, then added, “Since then, I’ve been telling myself that at least some of the things humans do have meaning.”

Masamichi stopped in his tracks and blinked. The meat he’d placed on a bite of rice he’d been about to put in his mouth was left suspended in the air.

“*Some* of the things?”

“Much that humans do is wasteful, meaningless, or at least illogical.”

After uttering these harsh words, Shino fell silent for a few seconds, then said, “The worst example of that is how humans speak different languages in each country. They should quickly unify that, then people will only need to learn one language, and no discrepancies will occur in translations. Why humans don’t bother to do that is beyond me.”

Leave it to Shino to be extreme. With a troubled face, Masamichi ate his mouthful of rice, chewed and savored the flavor, swallowed, and then opened

his mouth to speak. “That’s... Yeah, it’s rational, which is typical of the way you think, Shino, but I think everyone has a fondness for their language. It would probably be tough to narrow it down to just one.”

“Would it? I don’t see why. Any language should do, as long as the meaning gets across.”

“I know one thing for sure. I like Japanese, and I want to keep speaking it as my mother tongue.”

“Hmph. So you’re another one of those who have a meaningless obsession.”

“Huh? I didn’t think I’d get dissed just for liking the Japanese language.”

Eating his meal with gusto and a peculiar elegance, Shino finished everything before him and said casually, “By the way, Masamichi, you’re studying English at school, aren’t you?”

Masamichi answered a little nervously, wondering just how long they were going to discuss languages, “Yeah, since junior high. English is a part of my college entrance exam, so I’m still working on it.”

“Then be here tomorrow afternoon and speak English when a certain customer arrives,” Shino suddenly ordered as if it was not up for debate.

“Huh?!” Masamichi froze, his rice bowl and chopsticks halting in midair. “What was that? What did you just say?”

Masamichi was unable to follow what Shino was saying. Still, the specter continued speaking in a tone that suggested he was dealing with a hell of a fool.

“Through an introduction from one of my clients, I have a customer coming from England tomorrow afternoon. I don’t know if he’ll become a regular customer, but since I don’t speak English, you can handle the visit.”

Blood drained from Masamichi’s face as he finally began to understand the flow of the conversation.

“Huh...? Wait. You’re telling me to talk to a customer from England?!”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“Th-that’s impossible!”

“Why? You just told me that you’ve been studying English for a long time. It shouldn’t be a problem,” Shino said, furrowing his shapely brow, unable to understand why Masamichi was flustered.

Masamichi was already half crying.

“Wait. It’s true that I had English classes all these years, and I learned grammar and also a some conversation skills, but...”

“There you go.”

“No, you’ve got it wrong. Speaking fluently is totally different from understanding English grammar, writing sentences, and pronouncing English words half-decently... Oh, gee, it’s like you said. Why can’t everyone in the world speak one language?!”

Panicked, Masamichi ended up agreeing with what Shino had said, his voice oozing resignation. “Um, what I’m trying to tell you is that I really don’t think I can handle it.”

But Shino wasn’t going to listen. No matter how hard Masamichi insisted that he couldn’t speak English, Shino would never be willing to take no for an answer.

“Just do it.”

It figured. When Shino ordered Masamichi to do something, it was final.

What am I going to do? Maybe I can search online and find examples of business phrases that antique dealers use. It’ll be a terrible case of last-minute cramming, but it’s probably better than nothing.

Aware of Shino’s gaze, Masamichi tried to imagine himself entertaining a guest from England—in English—and his face turned blue, his appetite quickly vanishing.

“Oh god...we’re having my favorite pork and ginger tonight, but I can’t even taste it anymore.”

As Masamichi mumbled his grief, Shino stared coldly at him, a perfect example of normalcy, and said brusquely, “Hurry up and finish your dinner.”

CHAPTER 2

The Spirit Has Come

It was one forty-five PM the next day.

Shino sat at the table as usual, leisurely repairing a matcha bowl, then he suddenly stopped dusting the piece with gold powder and said curtly, “You’re distracting me! Stop wandering around in my field of vision.”

“Huh?! Oh, sorry!” Shino and Masamichi were the only ones in the store, so if Shino was reprimanding someone, it had to be him. After Masamichi apologized, he said as an excuse, “I feel too restless to stay still. I’ve cleaned the place as much as I could, and the air conditioner is working great, so we’re all set, right?”

Shino glared at Masamichi with a questioning look that meant, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Ngh... Oh, hey, do I really look okay in these clothes? Maybe I don’t have to wear a suit, but shouldn’t I at least wear a shirt and tie? Though I only have the shirt and tie from my high school uniform.”

“That’s enough. Wandering around like a bored bear isn’t going to change anything.”

Masamichi had been fidgety all morning, and Shino was quite fed up with him. He had run out of patience, so he clicked his tongue and spat, “What’s the point of you getting dressed up? Why are you so worried about some guest coming today anyway?”

Masamichi sat up straight near the table, looking dejected like a scolded child.

“Because...it’s a guest from abroad. England.”

“So what? Many customers come from far away.”

“I know. We had someone visit from Sapporo the other day. I remember that. But we’ve never had anyone from abroad, and England of all places...”

“What about England?”

Masamichi held his phone in one hand and showed it to Shino, whose handsome face was wrinkled with impatience, unable to understand what Masamichi was trying to say.

“All my English conversation teachers were American. I’ve never met anyone from England.”

“And?”

Shino regarded Masamichi suspiciously as the young man remained stiff but tried to make an excuse.

“I have this mental image of English people as being very proper.”

“That’s a biased preconception. Don’t you think it’s rude to lump everyone in a country together by some particular characteristic?”

“Maybe it is! But I searched antique stores in England and found various images of elegant businesspeople who seemed like gentlemen, looking smart in their suits...”

“All the stores and clerks there can’t be like that. Besides, that’s in England, and we’re in Japan.”

“But...”

“We have our rules, and they have theirs.”

“...Pfft!”

The anxiety disappeared from Masamichi’s face, and he started laughing, causing Shino to look miffed.

“What’s so funny?”

Stifling his laughter, Masamichi quickly apologized.

“Sorry. It’s just that I didn’t expect you to admonish me like a mother dealing with a spoiled child.”

“Well, that’s exactly what you’re acting like, talking nonsense. I don’t treat my customers any differently, whether they come from England or the moon.”

Shino’s words may have been harsh, but laughing helped Masamichi relax, and he understood what the specter was saying.

“Yeah. You’re absolutely right. We’ll welcome the customer as we always do. But oh gosh, English... I have to make a real effort so I don’t end up being rude.”

Masamichi remained seated on his knees and pulled out his phone. He checked the Practical English Conversation website he had bookmarked the night before and began quietly reading out words of greeting.

With a scoff, Shino went back to work.

“Don’t be so scared,” he said. “Saying hello can’t be that much of a challenge.”

“Ngh, okay then...”

“What?”

“...Nothing.”

“Then you do it...,” Masamichi almost said but swallowed the words. *He calls me his servant, but I’m not very useful, so this is the least that I can do.*

Masamichi’s earnest desire to help his master was making him even more nervous than he already was.

As if to add to the pressure, the living room clock struck two. It was time for the appointment.

“It’s time. I’ve heard that it’s good etiquette in some parts of Japan to be five minutes late, but I wonder how it is in England.”

“I don’t know,” Shino replied curtly, as usual.

“Do you think he knows where we are? It should be okay if he uses a map app, but maybe I should wait for him outside.”

Shino finished up his work, placed the matcha bowl in its dedicated box, and said emotionlessly, “...Whatever.”

“Okay, I’m going outside for a second.”

Shino didn't stop him, so Masamichi went down the steps from the tea room, put on his sandals, and headed for the entrance.

Just as he reached the middle of the aisle, the door opened.

With the cool sound of the Nambu iron tongs clattering, a man appeared...a young Caucasian man who appeared to be around thirty years old.

He was about a hundred seventy centimeters tall, with a sturdy frame but a thin build and broad shoulders, and he wore a dark-blue suit that fit as if it had been tailored.

His shirt was pure white, and the pattern on his tie was a bit tacky from a Japanese perspective, but Masamichi thought he wore it confidently, and it suited him well.

The man was clean-shaven, with short, neat, light-blond hair, and he gave the impression of a very tidy man.

Masamichi wouldn't go so far as to say he was as handsome as an actor, but his facial features were well-defined, and he had striking blue eyes.

Overall, his style was fresh and proper, and Masamichi quickly turned around and glanced at Shino.

See?!

Shino was coming down the steps into the store area, perhaps thinking it would be rude to look down at the customer from the tea room.

I told you! I knew we should have dressed up a bit, and it figures that the customer would show up wearing a crisp suit! It's okay for you since you're wearing a dress shirt, and all it's missing is a tie, but I'm in a polo...

Masamichi regretted his outfit choices, but it was too late now.

Despite his agitation, Masamichi walked up to the customer to greet him.

The man seemed overwhelmed by the piles of goods in the store and was curiously glancing about.

"G-good afternoon! We, uh, have been, um, expecting you," Masamichi said in English, bowing to the man and saying the greeting he had picked up online

and had been practicing until a few moments ago.

Maybe he should have offered the customer a handshake since he had gone to the trouble of greeting him in English, but that wasn't his habit, and Masamichi couldn't move his hand right away.

The man carried a sturdy briefcase, and he didn't seem confused by Masamichi's deep bow. In fact, he bowed back and then opened his mouth to speak.

"Do I have the correct place? Is this *Bougyou-dou*?"

Masamichi's head sprang up, and a sound of surprise escaped his lips.

The man was speaking Japanese.

He said the name *Bougyoudou* slowly and carefully, and there was a subtle awkwardness in his speech. Still, his Japanese was far more fluent and easier to understand than Masamichi's attempt at English.

"Oh...u-um, yes!" Masamichi confirmed, briefly reverting to Japanese.

After Masamichi, as flustered as ever, answered in the affirmative, the man asked:

"Then are you Shino Tatsumi?"

"Oh, no, no! That's not me... Um, come this way, please!" Masamichi answered in English.

Masamichi didn't have to speak English since the other man clearly spoke Japanese, but he couldn't switch his mind quickly and ended up mixing English words in his speech, waving his arms meaninglessly and then gesturing for the customer to come inside.

The man watched him in amusement as he would a puppet on strings, and he followed Masamichi down the aisle carefully so he wouldn't touch anything, creating a smooth rhythm of footsteps with his shiny leather shoes.

As usual, Shino looked the man over across his long desk.

"Oh, are you Shino Tatsumi?" the man said, appearing a little relieved when he saw Shino.

“I am, indeed, Shino Tatsumi, owner of Bougyoudou,” Shino said briefly and politely, offering his card. His rule seemed to be to treat customers with a little bit of respect.

The man also immediately pulled out a metal card case, and the two exchanged cards very smoothly.

A specter and an Englishman are exchanging business cards in the Japanese style...making it look like it's the most natural thing in the world. Maybe this customer went to the trouble of getting business cards printed before coming here. English people don't exchange cards...do they?

As Masamichi watched from the side, secretly regretting that no one else was around to share this strangely amusing experience with, Shino sat down quickly, then examined the man's card, and his expression hardened.

“Christopher Selwyn...?”

“Yes, sir,” the man replied and gave them a refreshing smile. “I'm Christopher Selwyn, and I've come from London.”

His name is Mr. Selwyn, and he really came from London...

Impressed and also relieved that he wouldn't have to deal with the customer in English as Shino had initially said, Masamichi walked around the desk and stood beside Shino.

But Shino looked suspiciously from the card to the man who called himself Selwyn and said, “This isn't the name of the man that Mr. Tokuyama said would be coming.”

As if to ask, “Who in the world are you?” Shino stared at the man in front of him. It was an intense gaze that would pressure any normal person, but Selwyn, still smiling, nodded.

“That's correct, sir. My employer, Lord Johnston, is the person Mr. Tokuyama gave an introduction to. I am Lord Johnston's secretary, here today in his stead.”

When Shino heard that, the wary look in his eyes faded somewhat.

“*Johnston*. Yes, that is indeed the name that I was told. And you are acting on

behalf of this Lord Johnston?”

“Yes, sir.”

Selwyn answered amiably, but Shino frowned, silent for a few seconds, then suddenly said, “I seem to recall that in ‘A Scandal in Bohemia,’ the king himself went to request a commission. Your employer is apparently more important than a king.”

“H-hey, Sh-Shino.”

Shino’s polite attitude had disappeared in a flash, and not only that, but Masamichi also couldn’t understand what he was talking about. All he could tell was that his tone was getting rude.

Panicked, Masamichi tried to calm Shino down, but Selwyn looked rather pleased, and his blue eyes lit up.

“Oh! That’s from Sherlock Holmes, written by our beloved Sir Arthur Conan Doyle! True, it’s very rude of us, and I beg your forgiveness.”

“...!”

Masamichi stared at Shino.

I didn’t know he read Sherlock Holmes!

Sure, he often saw Shino reading, but it was mostly ancient writings or classics. Natsume Soseki’s books were about the newest works that Masamichi had seen him flip through.

He had assumed that Shino only read books related to work at Bougyoudou, so he was completely taken aback by the unexpected revelation that the specter was actually a Sherlockian.

And he can bring it up on the spur of the moment during an exchange with an Englishman? Wow.

Perhaps it was only a specter’s sense of humor when he said he didn’t understand English. As Masamichi began harboring such doubts, Selwyn attempted to give a polite explanation.

“Lord Johnston should...should have come, but his ears are born...have

been...?”

“Are you saying he was born with something?” Masamichi suggested.

“Yes, that’s it. Sorry, I lived in Japan for ten years during my childhood, but I forgot a lot of Japanese. Too bad. I thought I’d remember better,” Selwyn said, and he managed to continue thanks to Masamichi’s help. “Can’t be helped. His ears are naturally no good, and he can’t stand flying on airplanes.”

Masamichi could see that the man was surprisingly knowledgeable about using polite Japanese, but the little mistakes he made now and then were probably due to his having been away from the country for some time.

Still, he’s super fluent compared with my English, and the mistakes are barely significant. It’s amazing when a person can speak a foreign language like that.

Impressed again, Masamichi could see that Shino seemed satisfied and the specter offered the guest a chair.

“Thank you...,” the visitor said.

Masamichi watched Selwyn sit in a wooden chair that was as old as the store itself, whispered to Shino that he would go and make some tea, and headed for the kitchen.

Even there, he could hear what Shino and Selwyn were saying, since it was a small house and no music was playing.

“So? You’ve come all the way from London, going to the trouble of asking my client, Mr. Tokuyama, for an introduction. What do you want?”

Shino...! We know Mr. Selwyn is here on his boss’s behalf, but that’s no way to talk to a customer. I hope Mr. Selwyn won’t get mad.

Masamichi was worried and couldn’t help but glance frequently at the conversing pair as he prepared tea.

Selwyn was still smiling, but he probably hadn’t expected such rough treatment. Clearing his throat slightly but politely, he began giving Shino information about his boss.

“My employer, Lord Johnston, is an earl...um, a nobleman. He operates household-goods stores in the UK, Ireland, and the EU. He’s both the store

owner and a top designer, and he's very popular. His creations are very stylish."

"Hmm."

Shino's lack of interest was too obvious.

Masamichi knew that his response was actually a sign that he was giving the customer his full attention, but Selwyn probably wouldn't see that.

I know I can't speak English, but maybe I should go listen to what Mr. Selwyn is saying.

Masamichi started toward the steps as he heard Selwyn continue to describe his employer with pride.

"He runs a big business... He also sells antiques he's collected over the years as a hobby and renovates old properties. Everything he does is extremely well received. His stores, his renovated houses—everything...is very stylish!"

He's saying his boss has great taste and is really accomplished. He used the word stylish twice.

"Mr. Tokuyama is very knowledgeable about Oriental antiques, which is why he and Lord Johnston are close."

They're "close," huh? I guess that means they're buddies. Mr. Tokuyama is a regular customer of Shino's. I haven't met him yet, but I wonder if he's a scholar, since he knows so much about Oriental antiques.

As Masamichi wondered what Mr. Tokuyama was like, Shino, who had been patiently listening to Selwyn, laughed as if to make fun of the man.

"Are you saying that man knows a lot about Oriental antiques? Tokuyama?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Selwyn was taken aback by Shino's response and stopped his explanation. Shino crossed his long legs under the table and said arrogantly, "Well, if you mean he can spot something worth a lot of money, then maybe you're right, and he is knowledgeable."

"Did you say 'something...worth a lot of money'? Please bear with me—my Japanese isn't exactly perfect."

Masamichi had just brought the men their tea and said discreetly, “You know, items that will sell at high prices.”

“Oh, right. Well, that’s wonderful. It’s indispensable for an antique dealer, isn’t it?” Selwyn asked.

Shino agreed coolly in response to Selwyn, whose splendid Queen’s English pronunciation of *antique dealer* resonated in the air.

“Perhaps it is indispensable for an antique dealer to run his business. But it isn’t enough.”

“It isn’t? What else does an antique dealer need? The ability to appreciate beauty? I believe that’s a given for the profession,” Selwyn responded politely as he tilted his head.

Continuing to keep a low profile, Masamichi poured and placed cups of green tea in front of the two men, impressed that Selwyn was courageous enough to avoid being intimidated by Shino’s high-handed attitude. Then Masamichi stood quietly behind the specter so he wouldn’t disturb him.

Shino offered the short version of his philosophy:

“An eye to see through the essence of an item.”

After considering his words for a few moments, Selwyn carefully asked, “When you say ‘the essence of an item,’ do you mean...authenticity?”

“No.”

Shino stood, went to a pile of items in the store, casually pulled out a piece, and returned to his seat.

He pulled out that one item without upsetting the balance of that precarious pile. Shino’s a natural-born Jenga player!

Oddly impressed, Masamichi looked at what Shino had placed on the long desk.

It appeared to be a Buddhist statue.

It was a wood carving, perhaps about thirty centimeters tall. It was originally painted, but that had almost completely peeled off, and it now showed several

large cracks and chips.

With Masamichi's limited knowledge of Buddhism, he couldn't even tell if it was a bodhisattva or tathagata. Still, it had a smooth body, and the folds of the deity's robe were carved beautifully.

Although the statue was in a pitiful state, its face was captivating and appealing.

"Oh, I don't know much about... 'Buddha statues'—is that what this is?" Selwyn asked.

"No, it isn't Buddha, but that doesn't matter. This is one of the statues that your employer's friend, Mr. Tokuyama, was forced to buy so he could get his hands on the Buddha statue that he wanted. Its monetary value as a work of art is obviously low. The overall condition is too poor."

"Yes, I can see that. It has a lot of insect infestation, and I can't imagine any customer would want to decorate their home with this," Selwyn agreed, looking sorry.

"Tokuyama thought he could sell a statue he'd been forced to buy in combination with the one he wanted. Or perhaps he figured he could throw it away as long as he got what he was after. However, this statue had become an artifact spirit at some point. It must have built up resentment toward the owners it has had, who have considered it unworthy and paid no heed to the prayers of the individual who carved it. That resentment and hatred finally exploded with Tokuyama's treatment."

Masamichi gasped at Shino's mention of the term *artifact spirit*.

Is Mr. Selwyn another customer...who's actually interested in that sort of thing?

When Shino's predecessor ran Bougyoudou, it'd been a regular store that sold antiques and antique tools.

But since Shino took over, a new business was born besides that front, and now the mainstay activity at Bougyoudou was dealing with artifact spirits.

The large number of items displayed in the store, or rather *existed* in the

store, had acquired a soul of their own over the years and become a kind of specter, and Shino described them as artifact spirits.

If these artifact spirits were compatible with their owners and were cared for as they desired, they would protect them and bring them good luck.

But if they weren't compatible with their owners or were treated badly, they would become angry and haunt them and might even cause life-threatening situations for their owners.

Shino took in such artifact spirits and assessed the degree of their potential harm to humans. He matched items with less power to clients he determined were good matches and gave them away on the condition that the new owners would handle them with care.

According to Shino, he ran an "artifact spirit mediation business," which Masamichi secretly called an "introduction business for lucky items."

The vessels piled high in the store were waiting. They relaxed with their peers while anticipating new masters with whom they might be compatible.

However, some of the artifact spirits were extremely powerful and harbored deep resentment and anger toward humans. Exterminating such artifact spirits because there was no other choice, as far as Masamichi could tell, was a business that only Shino could conduct.

I wonder if Mr. Selwyn knows about artifact spirits?

"Oh, artifact spirits! Lord Johnston mentioned them to me before I came here. Then is that Buddha...I mean, statue...an artifact spirit?" said Selwyn.

"It was once an artifact spirit, though it's simply a shell now," Shino explained. "It's sad to throw it away, so I took it in. Someday, an eccentric person might come along and want it as a mere Buddhist statue."

"Oh...?"

Selwyn tilted his head with curiosity, and Shino responded casually, "When Tokuyama came running to me through an introduction, this statue's curse had him on the brink of death. Its previous owner treated it like it was nothing but a nuisance, and then Tokuyama bought it for next to nothing and saw it as trash.

You can't blame it for being angry."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying someone was cursed to death? And what's this about anger? How can a statue like this kill someone?" Selwyn asked like a child begging for a ghost story, and Shino answered him with a dark look in his eyes.

"Humans are creatures that can die from fear. You can try to break an artifact spirit, but they will evade you, and even if you try to distance yourself from them, they will always come back. They will continue to show their hatred and murderous intent, which alone can drive a human being into a corner. An artifact spirit never gives up. It never tires of hating and cursing. Once angered, it will stalk and spread curses until it kills."

Masamichi and Selwyn gulped at the same time.

Selwyn's fear probably came from his imagination, but Masamichi's was based on experience.

Since becoming Shino's servant, Masamichi had almost been killed by an artifact spirit because of a mistake he'd made, and he had also witnessed and helped Shino deal with such dangerous spirits.

Shino's simple words filled Masamichi's heart with the terror and misery he had felt at the time.

"I considered causing some harm to the spirit to calm it down, then allowing it to join the other artifact spirits at my store, but there was no way to quiet the raging spirit that resided in this statue. So..."

Without explicitly stating that he had eaten its soul, Shino shrugged.

He ate it!

Masamichi could just picture it, but Selwyn's curiosity seemed sated.

"Oh, so you must have chased away the artifact spirit! That's what we're interested in," he said enthusiastically. "Mr. Tatsumi. You helped Mr. Tokuyama. This time, we want you to please help my employer, Lord Johnston."

Still seated in a more relaxed position than was polite, Shino expertly raised his right eyebrow.

“Hey, don’t tell me your employer is also cursed for offending some artifact spirit?”

“Oh, it hasn’t gotten to that stage yet. But...Lord Johnston wishes to ask you to...*remove a curse.*”

The man wants Shino to remove a curse? A curse... Is he being haunted by an artifact spirit? I wonder what kind of spirit it could be.

Like Masamichi, the issue must have interested Shino somewhat. He finally leaned forward in his chair and said, “What kind of curse?”

Selwyn extracted something from the attaché case by his feet and placed it on the desk.

Shino reached for it, and Masamichi peeked over his shoulder.

“Huh?!” Masamichi let out a small cry of surprise.

It was a photograph—of a house.

But it wasn’t a regular house.

In Japanese terms, one might call it a small housing complex...or a tenement house, though that description didn’t quite match the image.

It was a structure of five two-story, box-shaped houses that were joined together and looked mostly identical in design.

They were cute buildings that reminded Masamichi of building-block houses, and he smiled.

“I once saw a TV show about traveling in England and saw buildings like these lined up along the street. Flats, right?”

Selwyn gently corrected him.

“They’re a little more upscale than flats. These are called terraced houses.”

“‘Terraced houses’... I’ve never heard of them before. Are they dollhouses or something? Or toy houses...made of building blocks?”

He hadn’t even imagined that they were actual residences, and Shino bluntly interrupted:

“Fool. These look like toys to you?”

“Huh?! Then...they’re real?”

“Take a good look.”

Masamichi moved his face a little closer to see the photo, which Shino had shoved toward him.

Indeed, upon closer inspection, he realized that the houses bore the weightiness of history and time, which a model certainly couldn’t show.

The reddish-brown brick buildings had a beautiful arch over their stylish entrances, and the marble decorations set along the arch, the window frames, and the slate roof were reminiscent of plants and trees.

After being exposed to the elements over the years, the marble was slightly grayish, which blended well with the ancient-looking brick.

The most striking feature common to all five buildings was the sunroom, made of steel and glass, that occupied most of the second floor.

Perhaps because the buildings dated back to before huge sheets of glass could be made, many pieces of glass were connected with steel frames, which made them look like elegant stained glass despite the use of relatively unrefined materials.

“I see. These houses are lovely. They look old,” Masamichi said.

“Lord Johnston said they were built during the nineteenth century.”

“Really?! They’ve been standing for two hundred years?! Wow.”

Masamichi’s admiration of the houses seemed to take Selwyn by surprise.

“Well, in my country, houses are typically built of stone and brick, so there are many older houses. People like caring for old houses and living in them. Old houses are very expensive, you know.”

“They are? Are they more expensive than new houses?”

“Everyone dreams about living in an old cottage in the countryside with beautiful scenery when they retire.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

As Selwyn and Masamichi chatted happily, Shino took the photo and asked as curtly as ever, “So what about the house in question? Did it come with furniture that had turned into artifact spirits or something?”

Selwyn’s expression became serious, and he straightened his posture.

“Lord Johnston has an ancestral house and estate in Kent, in southeastern England. He spends his weekends there, but the rest of the time, he works in an office in London, so he has a house in that area. He wanted something a little quieter, and this terraced house on the outskirts of London caught his eye. It’s a beautiful building that met his criteria, and... Let me point it out to you. This one here, one of the five houses at the site, had been vacant for many years.”

Selwyn pointed with the tip of his neatly manicured nail to the house on the far right.

“He promptly bought the house, spent about six months renovating it considerably, and moved in exactly two weeks ago.”

“And?”

Prompted by Shino, Selwyn lowered his voice a fraction.

“And...as is often the case with old houses, spooky things began happening after the lord moved in. Uh, spooky...scary, suspicious... What’s the word in Japanese?”

“*Unnatural phenomena?*” Masamichi offered.

“That’s it!”

Selwyn snapped his fingers and leaned in toward Shino and Masamichi.

“According to Lord Johnston, he hears footsteps at night when there should be no one else in the house; doors open and close on their own; the TV turns on and off; he hears music from an unknown source; things change position; vases suddenly fall over...”

As Selwyn used his fingers to tell them about the strange happenings at the house, Shino and Masamichi looked at each other, and then Masamichi slowly spoke up.

“They sound like typical examples of a poltergeist.”

“Ah, you know that word in Japan as well, do you? Yes, that’s it. There are people in my country who would be delighted if that was all, but...”

“What? Some people enjoy things like that?” Masamichi asked.

“There’s such a thing as a haunted house—as entertainment. They’re very popular,” Selwyn said with a pleasant smile and then quickly returned to the subject. “That’s not all. Lord Johnston says he can feel someone’s presence at night. He says that’s, uh...spooky, and it’s difficult for him to continue living there, which is why he’s now staying at a hotel in London.”

“Oh...that must be tough,” Masamichi mumbled sympathetically.

Selwyn frowned ruefully in agreement.

“But he likes the house, and he’s invested a considerable amount of money in it. Lord Johnston wants to use its beauty in a commercial shoot for a household product he designed.”

“Oh, so he wants to live there and also use it for photo shoots.”

“Right, which is why he can’t have it haunted. So he discussed the matter with Mr. Tokuyama...who told him about Mr. Tatsumi.”

Although Masamichi wasn’t aware of it, his modest responses tended to make it easy for people to talk. Selwyn looked questioningly at Shino as he relaxed a little.

“So, Mr. Tatsumi. What do you think?”

“The entire house is the subject of your request, huh? What about the other four houses? Strange happenings aren’t also being noticed in them, are they?”

Selwyn shook his head. He seemed to have already looked into that.

“No, sir. I had people investigate as soon as Lord Johnston told me about it. None of the other four owners mentioned any...poltergeist activities.”

“Hmm. Perhaps a murder occurred in the house your employer bought, or else...”

“I checked into that possibility as well, but it doesn’t look like that’s the case. All I’ve learned is that this one house has been vacant for a long time.”

“Okay,” Shino said, then clammed up. But he continued to stare at Selwyn.

“Oh, excuse me!” Selwyn exclaimed and then pulled out another file from his briefcase. It was a single sheet of paper.

“Lord Johnston would like you to come to the site and exorcise the house. We will arrange for your plane tickets and hotel. As to payment...” He pushed the paper toward Shino, showing him the offer amount in British pounds and its yen conversion printed in small letters.

Masamichi peeked from behind Shino and gasped.

The indicated amount was enough to buy a fancy car.

I only know the amounts Shino gets for dealing with lucky items, but...who would have guessed that he receives this much for a serious case? No wonder he's rich.

As soon as he started living with Shino, Masamichi had noticed that the specter led a fairly affluent lifestyle despite the small, old building where he slept and awoke every day.

He wasn't extravagant, but Shino generally chose high-quality food and clothing. Also, for housing, he may have complained that humans worried about the smallest things, but he made prompt decisions when Masamichi requested repairs and home appliances.

Because of that, Masamichi was secretly happy and proud that the conditions in the store's living area had improved quite a bit since he moved in.

But not many people—I mean, specters—can do what Shino does, so I guess it isn't as if Shino's ripping his customers off.

As if to support Masamichi's assumption, Selwyn said emphatically, “Sir, we are ready to negotiate if the price is too low. We'll give your suggestions serious consideration.”

Then Shino said, “This is fine,” and quickly got to his feet. “When do we start?”

Selwyn stood up as quickly as a spring-operated doll and answered, “As soon as possible! Just let me know when you will be available to travel, and I'll make

all the arrangements.”

“As soon as possible”...

Both impressed and dumbstruck, Masamichi looked from Shino to Selwyn.

Shino standing up was a sign that the conversation was over and the visitor should leave. Selwyn sensed this and quickly grabbed his briefcase.

“Please keep this estimate sheet and the photo. You can contact me by phone or e-mail—my contacts are on my business card.”

“All right.”

With that, Shino picked up the photo and the document and headed back to the tea room.

Specters didn’t have a habit of saying hello or good-bye, and neither did they have a custom of seeing off their guests.

“Um, thank you for coming all the way to Japan. Are you already flying back to England?” Masamichi asked, trying to make up for Shino’s lack of manners, and Selwyn nodded, flashing a beautiful smile.

“Yes, I am. I’m flying back to London tonight. Next time, I will meet Mr. Tatsumi at Heathrow Airport.”

“...Thank you!”

Masamichi knew that Shino would probably chew him out later for thanking the man on his behalf, but he couldn’t help it.

Selwyn responded with a quick wink, downed the tea that Masamichi had poured him, and left the store...

That night at dinner, Masamichi brought up the subject of what had happened during the day.

“Hey, Shino? So when are you going to London? Mr. Selwyn said he wanted you to come as soon as you could.”

The main dish that night was a simple meal of grilled chicken thighs covered with salted rice malt, which had been left to marinate overnight, along with vegetables like eggplant and lotus root.

Eating huge mouthfuls of the chicken, which had been cut into long, thin pieces, Shino replied, “Next week,” with the cheeks of his beautiful face puffed up as he chewed. “I have visitors lined up through this weekend.”

Before responding, Masamichi blew on his hot soup of tomatoes and beaten eggs, cooling it and taking a sip. It was a rich and nutritious Chinese-style soup finished with a dab of chili oil.

“Next week, huh? Yeah, I guess you can’t cancel the appointments you already have,” Masamichi said with a smile, feeling a little sad that he’d be alone for a while. “I may not be too reliable as a house sitter, but I promise I’ll take care of the house and the artifact spirits to the best of my ability, and I’ll be careful that we don’t have a fire or anything.” He was trying to give Shino peace of mind before he left for his trip, but the specter looked as if he had swallowed bad vinegar. “Huh?! Oh, um, you don’t think the house and the spirits are in good hands with me watching over them? I guess you’re right. I did it once before—making an artifact spirit mad—so I can’t say I blame you. I wouldn’t be of use to any customers who might come here, so... I know. I can go to a business hotel by the train station while you’re away.”

“What are you talking about?” Shino spat with a grave expression. Then this time, he tossed a lotus root in his mouth.

“I’m talking about what I’ll do while you’re in England.”

“Do you intend to let your master travel to a foreign country by himself?”

“Huh?!”

“If a master goes, it’s only natural that his servant accompanies him. I know you often act like you’re talking in your sleep, but you really must wake up.”

“Huuuh?!”

Stunned, Masamichi pointed at his chest.

“Who...? Me? I can go with you?”

“Of course you can.”

“But all I can do is carry your bags. Or will there be something I can help with, maybe just a little, when you exorcise the house?”

“We won’t know until we get there. But the more pawns I have to play, the better.”

Shino knew no such thing as consideration. Although Masamichi was a little hurt, having been called a pawn, a strange type of excitement welled up inside him.

It’ll be my first trip with Shino! And abroad at that! To Europe!

Maybe it was in bad taste to be overjoyed, but he couldn’t wait.

But oh...my prep school...

As an individual who had failed his college entrance exams twice and was studying to try again for the third time, Masamichi was somewhat concerned about his summer classes, which were already underway. But he couldn’t prioritize that when Shino, his master and sponsor, was ordering him to accompany him on his trip.

I’ll pack my textbooks in my suitcase.

His mind was made up, and Masamichi was about to say “okay” when he screeched.

“What is it?”

Masamichi looked at Shino uneasily, ignoring Shino’s disapproval.

“You’re going to England! You need a passport, that’s what! You’re a specter, and you wouldn’t have one...”

“I do,” Shino said calmly, and Masamichi’s shoulders sagged.

“You have a passport? Oh yeah, people thought you’d lost your memory and set you up with an ID.”

Shino nodded and explained briefly as he devoured his meal.

“At first, I thought family registers were a nuisance and that I would have to choose some appropriate time to fake my death eventually...but it’s because I have it that I can get a passport. And now that I’ve gotten one, it’s pretty useful.”

“You mean as identification?”

“Right. Daizo advised me to apply for a passport because, in the antique trade, one never knows when you might have to do business abroad. He also said that passports were convenient since they proved my identity wherever I was in the world.”

“That’s great advice! Then it isn’t a problem.”

“What about you? I hope you have a passport.”

Masamichi nodded, returning to his carefree smile.

“Yep, I do! We went on a high school field trip to South Korea, and I got it then.”

“A school field trip?”

Having never gone to high school himself, Shino looked at Masamichi suspiciously.

“Japanese kids go on a field trip in their junior or senior year of high school. At my school, we went in May of my senior year.”

“Ah, and you ventured abroad. How extravagant.”

“It was actually cheaper than traveling domestically. The girls were really happy, talking about makeup and sweets and stuff.”

“What about you?”

“I enjoyed it, too...I think, but I was so sleepy that I don’t remember much of it.”

“Sleepy? Why?”

“I’m okay now since I’ve lived away from home for quite a while, but back then, I couldn’t sleep if I was anywhere else. So I ended up being tired throughout the trip. Oh, but the food was good. Barbecued beef, simmered beef, and ox bone soup...yum.”

“Bread is better than the song of birds, huh?”

“Something like that. I would wake up half asleep, unable to get a good night’s rest, doze on the bus, act like I was sleepwalking when we went sightseeing, finally be fully awake at mealtime, eat a delicious meal, feel tired

again once I was full...and repeat.” Masamichi smiled with a little embarrassment, then suddenly began asking questions.

“Shino, you have a passport, but have you actually traveled abroad? I mean, for business meetings, job requests like with Mr. Selwyn...or just for fun?”

Shino thought about it for a moment, then said:

“I haven’t intentionally used my passport.”

His vague answer confused Masamichi.

“You haven’t used your passport...but you *have* been abroad?”

“Yeah.”

“As a stowaway?”

“Don’t make me out to be a criminal.”

Despite being offended, Shino offered a little more detail. “Before Tokifuyu locked me in this vessel with limited mobility, I used to fly across the sea occasionally, to what is now called mainland China. On a whim, I would wander around lands strange to me, spot humans that looked delicious, and—”

“Stop right there!” Masamichi interrupted Shino’s descriptions of eating people before he got started, then asked him another question. “Have you been to England, too?”

Shino frowned and replied calmly, “I never went that far, and my point is that I never gave a thought to borders between countries.”

“Oh, I see... Well, I’m surprised to hear that specters are globe-trotters.”

Oddly impressed, Masamichi looked a little victorious.

“I guess it means I’ve one-upped you in using a passport and flying in an airplane.”

“...What did you say?”

“Ha-ha-ha, sorry, nothing. I think I’m just a little excited. I know it’s work, but England is a country I’ve always dreamed about. I’m thrilled to think that I’ll be traveling there with you.”

“You’re thrilled about exorcising a house? You’re certainly a strange one.”

“That isn’t it... Um, we’ll have a little time to go sightseeing, won’t we? I want to look around a bit since we’re going all the way to England, and it’ll be my first time there.”

“I don’t know,” Shino said flatly, but Masamichi was getting his hopes up.

“I’ll go out and buy a guidebook tomorrow. Let’s check it out together. I’ve seen on TV that in England—especially London—they have many history and art museums. I’m sure there will be many places that would be interesting to you.”

Shino looked weary and didn’t even bother to respond, but Masamichi was filled with hope that the specter would soon discover the fun of traveling.

“I’ll look for videos, too. It might be easier to get an idea of the place from videos rather than books.”

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but although Shino may not look as much now, knowing his curious mind, he would surely become interested as long as Masamichi kept providing information.

Of course, the most important thing is to get the job done, but it would be nice if we could also have some fun.

Wishing that from his heart, Masamichi was about to set out on a journey that would be filled with various ups and downs...

CHAPTER 3

As a Servant

Ping!

Masamichi's eyes fluttered open when he heard an unfamiliar, somewhat muffled electronic sound.

I fell asleep! But never mind that, what was that noise?

As if in answer to Masamichi's question, a female voice announced over the speakers that the seat belt sign was now turned off, but for passengers to please keep their seat belts fastened while seated in case of sudden turbulence.

"Oh right, my seat belt. Okay."

Remembering that he was on a plane, Masamichi exhaled deeply.

He'd felt overwhelmed by the huge roar of the engines during takeoff, but humans quickly got used to such things.

Masamichi barely noticed the sound once they got cruising in the sky, and before he knew it, he was dozing off. He had barely slept the night before, busy checking to make sure he wouldn't forget anything, and the anxiety and excitement typical of travelers had kept him wide-awake.

And these seats are too comfy. I mean, is this really okay? Masamichi wondered as he fidgeted restlessly in his seat.

Once Shino contacted Christopher Selwyn with dates for when he could fly to London, the Englishman had immediately arranged their plane tickets.

According to Shino, Selwyn expected Masamichi to accompany him, though Masamichi hadn't even imagined that Selwyn would book a business-class seat for him as well.

It was Masamichi's first time flying business class, and everything was

different from the coach class he had taken during his high school field trip.

Shino and Masamichi didn't have window seats, since two-seat rows were only available in the middle of the plane, but the comfortable, spacious arrangements more than made up for it.

Master and servant were seated next to each other, but they had a large table and partition between them. They could see each other and talk if they leaned forward, but the design guaranteed plenty of privacy if they leaned back in their seats.

The seats themselves were spacious, and they had fairly good-sized screens in front of them.

Masamichi hadn't tried it yet, but he was told the seats could be made flat, and he could slip his feet beneath the monitor to lie on his back and sleep.

It was nothing like the cramped seats he had imagined. It was more like the *study booths* at his prep school, only far more comfortable.

Masamichi rested his elbow on the side table and called out softly, "Hey, Shino?"

"What is it?"

He heard the usual bland response.

Still, it didn't seem as if Shino was refusing conversation, so Masamichi sat up straight on the edge of his seat and looked at Shino past the partition between them.

Resting on Shino's lap was a tablet provided by the airline. He didn't appear to be watching anything in particular, but maybe he couldn't find anything that interested him.

"Is it really okay for me to be sitting here in business class?"

Looking exasperated, Shino said, "How long are you going to go on about that? They arranged it. You can sit back and relax."

"I feel guilty. If the master is sitting in business class, then shouldn't the servant be in economy?"

Masamichi only stated what he considered to be common sense, but Shino looked at him like he was a total fool.

“Do you want to get away from me and stretch your wings? Do you want to make me, your master, take the trouble of going to coach class to fetch you if I need something?”

“Oh!”

“A master and servant are expected to be in the same place. It is in no way intended to allow you to travel in luxury. You sit there on standby and wait for me to give you an order at any time.”

“Okay, I think I finally get it.”

“Normally, a good servant would anticipate and act without being told, but I don’t expect that much from you. You’d probably end up doing something that isn’t needed.”

“Th-thanks for the accurate assessment. I, uh, want to be able to anticipate and act properly someday.”

“Hmph. Work on it.”

Shino’s explanation made sense to Masamichi, though he still couldn’t stop thinking this was a luxury beyond his means. Well, if that’s the way it was, he thought, he had to do what a servant was expected to do.

“Is there anything I can do for you now?”

“No,” Shino replied, and Masamichi’s shoulders slumped.

“I knew it...! You can do everything yourself.”

“Wait, there is something you can do,” Shino corrected.

“Really?”

As Masamichi inadvertently raised his hopes and his pitch went up a notch, Shino said with his usual grumpy face, “Talk. Flying in a plane is more boring than I thought, and I’m getting irritated thinking I’ll have to stay this way for a half day more.”

“What?! Isn’t it awfully soon for you to get bored? The seats are comfy, we

can watch movies, and dinner will soon be served. I checked the business-class meal menu a minute ago and almost fainted. It's super fancy!"

"Hmph. You aren't hard to please. In any case, I am now bored."

Shino's unreasonable demand ruined Masamichi's momentary joy, and a worried look immediately appeared on the young man's face.

"You tell me to talk, but I'm not good with words, and I don't have a wealth of stories you'll enjoy hearing. No way I can help you kill time... Oh, I know." Masamichi pulled out his tablet and showed Shino the display. "Look at all this in-flight entertainment. They have quite a variety of stuff you can listen to. Radio shows, podcasts, and different types of music. Oh, and they have *rakugo* storytelling, too. I don't know if these would be entertaining for a specter, but they would sure beat me talking..."

Masamichi was desperate to offer his master something to pass the time, but Shino made a terribly grim face and said, "I'm not interested."

"No? Then—"

"Didn't you hear me? I said, talk."

"But I—"

"I'm saying I'm bored to death, so I'm willing to listen to what you have to say."

"Huh?!"

"You've been wandering around the house these last few days, glancing at me as if you wanted to say something. Didn't you think I noticed?"

Masamichi swallowed.

"You noticed...! I wasn't sure whether to mention it to you. I didn't think it was something I needed to talk to you about, and seeing as you were busy finishing up your work before leaving for England, I didn't want to bother you."

Shino, who had his seat belt securely fastened like a good passenger, leaned back and stared coldly at Masamichi.

"I'm not busy now. You can talk, and I'm willing to listen."

“Th-thanks, but I’m not a good talker, and more than anything, I don’t have a punch line.”

“I don’t care. Don’t think for a minute that a servant can hide something from his master. Tell me everything.”

“...Okay, if you say so.”

With his master urging him on, Masamichi had no choice but to confide in him honestly as his servant. He leaned against his side table, brought his face close to the partition, and said in a soft voice, “Just before Mr. Selwyn came to the store and you decided to go to England, I was thinking of asking you for a few days off for the summer.”

Shino didn’t seem to have expected that. With his head still resting on the soft cushion, he repeated with a somewhat stern expression, “A few days off for the summer?”

Things were already starting to get sketchy, and Masamichi shrank into himself like a turtle hiding in its shell...or rather, his shoulders were hunched up more than normal.

“As a flunky studying to get into college and a servant, I thought it might be shameless of me to ask you for a vacation, but if I could get three—no, a couple of days off, I’d want to go home, since I haven’t been back for over a year.”

“You said you were from Akita, correct? We received fine eggplants, edamame, and tomatoes from your parents last week, and they were superb—devoid of needless processing. You said your family grew them.”

“They were extra tasty after you cooked them so skillfully... Yeah, my parents and my grandfather grew them. The vegetables they sent tasted just like the ones I had eaten during my childhood,” Masamichi said, smiling as he thought of his family.

Shino looked at his baby face and asked, “A year is but a blink of an eye to me, but for humans, who exaggerate the length of a year, it must seem long. Why haven’t you been home in that time?”

“The biggest problem is money. Transportation costs are pretty high. Besides, I wasn’t sure I wanted to see them after I failed my college entrance exams. I

was planning to go back once I passed, but you know how that went...”

“Hmm. So why do you want to go home now when you haven’t been accepted?”

Masamichi looked embarrassed.

“I guess I’m homesick. Even if I talk with my folks on the phone or through video calls, it sometimes makes me feel the distance between us, and I want to see them in person. Besides, you’ve been paying me more than enough since I became your servant, and I don’t have to worry about living expenses anymore, so I can afford to pay my travel expenses. It’s all thanks to you, Shino.”

“Hmph.”

“And because of that, it’s been tough to ask you for time off. I’ve been arguing with myself whether it was okay to go home if it made things inconvenient for you while I’m away.”

“So that’s why you’ve been acting fidgety. What do you take me for? Do you think I’m so selfish that I wouldn’t even give you two or three days off?”

Seeing that Shino appeared to have been somewhat offended, Masamichi quickly waved his hands and denied it.

“No, no, that’s not it. Besides, I was hesitant for a while, but I haven’t been like that all this time. I thought I’d ask my parents about it before I talked to you, and...my dad said no, just like that.”

“He did?”

“He said he, Mom, and Granddad were going away for a while on a trip.”

“A trip? For a while? Are they heading overseas...?”

“No, it would be too challenging for Granddad to go abroad suddenly, and Dad said they’re taking about two weeks to travel around Japan.”

When he heard the mention of a trip around Japan, Shino widened his eyes, which were as sharp as Japanese swords.

“They’re traveling around Japan for two weeks? That’s really...awkward. If I was still in my previous specter state, I would go around the country in less than

a day. Even flying in airplanes should only take a few days, and that's considering the connecting flights. Then again, two weeks wouldn't be nearly enough if they're walking... Are they driving?"

Masamichi felt a little smug that Shino's guess was off for once. But he struggled not to let it show and cautiously started explaining how his family was traveling.

"There are many bus tours, but I don't think a round-the-country tour is available. It would be tough for Granddad, and it's possible it'd seriously damage my parents' backs, too. What they're doing—and I was surprised to hear this—is traveling by ship."

Shino looked uncharacteristically surprised, as if the option had never crossed his mind.

"A ship! Yes, one can travel to the Tang or the Song dynasty on a ship, so it should certainly be possible to sail along the coasts of Japan. But...two weeks?" Shino asked, bewildered.

It appeared that Shino was thinking of Tang dynasty envoy ships from a thousand years ago, and it almost made Masamichi giggle as he recalled his Japanese-history classes.

"Tang dynasty envoy ships must have been very impressive, but my family's going on a luxury cruise."

"A luxury...cruise."

"Like this."

Still impressed that Wi-Fi was available during the flight, Masamichi searched on his phone, which had been set to airplane mode, for a photo of the ship his family was sailing on and showed it to Shino.

"This photo doesn't give me a good idea of the size of the ship."

"Mmm, here are its dimensions... Wow, it's huge. It's around two hundred meters long and thirty meters wide."

"...That *is* quite big."

"Yep. It has about four hundred cabins and can board nine hundred

passengers or so. Isn't that amazing? It's like an apartment building or a city. Look here. The ship has a restaurant, a huge bathing area, a lounge, a spa, a theater, and even a library. I hear they have various events and guest activities, like concerts, so that passengers won't get bored. Oh, they even have a mah-jongg parlor. Granddad's going to love that."

Masamichi smiled as he thought of his grandfather, who loved playing mah-jongg. But Shino looked at the screen and Masamichi's face alternately with a mix of admiration and puzzlement.

"This ship certainly looks like it has more things for guests to do as they wander around compared with our plane. But if it's 'like a city,' then why not simply stay in their city? If all they're doing is sailing around the coast of Japan and coming back..."

"Oh, no. They *are* going all the way around the coast, but they get to disembark here and there and tour famous sites. Then they go back to the ship and resume their journey. My grandfather's old, so the best thing about the cruise is that the connections from the ship to the buses and back will be very convenient. Come to think of it, a cruise is generally a long trip, but it isn't too taxing on the body."

"I'm beginning to understand."

As Shino listened to Masamichi describe the sea journey, his puzzled expression reverted to his usual reticent look.

"Passengers can go sightseeing, then rest on the ship instead of relaxing at some hotel, and in the meantime, their bodies are automatically transported to the next port of call. It's a very productive system for people to travel efficiently while conserving their energy," Shino summarized.

"Yeah, exactly! They can go sightseeing like they would on any other trip, but the transportation part is much easier. They can also enjoy special events on board without having to move to another location, so I think it's fantastic for older people."

"Hmm. I'm not an old man, but this luxury cruise sounds interesting, and I will give it a try sometime. You will come with me when I do."

He didn't sound like he was inviting a friend out for a cruise. It was purely an order for Masamichi to come along as his servant. Still, Masamichi's heart fluttered with hope as he imagined himself going on a cruise with Shino.

"With pleasure! Oh, but that wasn't what we were talking about. Back to just after I scrapped my plans to return home to Akita—I was really surprised."

"About what? Surely your family will have opportunities to travel as you're doing now."

"It's never been possible until now," Masamichi said seriously as he placed his phone on the side table. Shino lifted his chin a bit and urged him to go on.

Relieved that a story about his personal affairs seemed to be helping Shino pass the time, Masamichi confided in him.

"We've been making a living by farming since my great-grandfather's generation—maybe even before that. So we have rice paddies and fields to take care of throughout the year. Especially in the summer, vegetables have to be harvested every day, and we need to carefully control how much they're watered. Because of that, our family vacations have always been limited to one night and two days tops around New Year's."

"It makes sense that the fields must be tended to."

"So I was stunned when I heard they were going away for two whole weeks. Then Dad said something even more shocking..."

"Which was?"

Masamichi looked somewhat pained as he cast his eyes down.

"My granddad had health problems in January, and then Dad did as well in February. Dad had a herniated cervical disc...his neck bone. It wasn't life-threatening, but his hands became paralyzed, and he'll probably need surgery in the near future. As for my granddad, he had a stroke..."

"That's serious."

"It was relatively minor this time, but the location was quite dangerous. Granddad didn't need surgery, and he was only in the hospital for two weeks, but my parents are pretty worried."

“Expose meat to iron, and the taste will go bad on contact. The same can probably be said of the human body. It’s a good thing he didn’t need an operation. What about the aftereffects?”

Uttering a view that only a specter could have, Shino still expressed concern for Masamichi’s grandfather. Perhaps his attachment to the previous Bougyoudou owner and his wife had led to a sense of respect for all elderly humans.

Masamichi had assumed that Shino wouldn’t be interested in his family’s health concerns, so he was both a little happy and very much surprised.

“He was left with slight paralysis, and it’s a little tough for him to get around now. His body isn’t well-balanced when he walks, which seems to cause him pain everywhere. But when I talked to him on the phone, Granddad said over and over that he was fine and didn’t have any problems.”

“I see. You humans may have short life spans in the first place, so it must be good news to hear that a relative is living longer, even for another day.”

It may not have been a direct expression of relief, but Shino’s roundabout phrasing was a blessing when you read between the lines.

“Thanks,” Masamichi said with a smile, then his expression clouded.

“But with both of them having health issues one after the other, Mom’s had a hard time taking care of them, and who knows what could happen to them in the future? So they talked it over and decided to quit farming. They seemed relieved to sell their land to a fellow farmer they’d known for a long time. But Dad told me he’d continue to make rice and vegetables for themselves and that he’d send some to me, too, which was good to hear.”

“.....”

“I have no objection to it if my dad and granddad talked it through and decided to quit farming. Their health is more important than anything, and Dad was invited to work at a friend’s company and is doing well there. Of course, I want my granddad to relax and take it easy, and my mom has to be happy now that she can go on trips when she wants.”

Masamichi didn’t sound gloomy, but there was a hint of worry on his face,

and Shino interrupted in a whisper, “You have no objection to it, but you seem unhappy.”

Masamichi searched for a way to express his feelings, then said bluntly, “I’m not unhappy. I just feel awfully lost.”

“Lost? Why would you be lost when they decided for themselves what they wanted to do?”

“I...I told you before that I was a very weak child. Even now, I can’t say I’m great at physical labor. That’s why my dad and granddad never wanted me to take over the farm.”

“Well, it’s true that you barely put on weight no matter what I feed you.”

“Sorry. I can’t gain fat, and I don’t seem to gain muscles, either. Maybe I... don’t absorb food very well. So I thought the least I could do was study agriculture at college and learn things like how to grow better crops and improve the farming environment. Then I could support my dad and granddad... and make things a little easier for them.”

“But now that they’ve quit farming, you’ve lost not only your inspiration for going to college but also what you wanted to do with your life, huh?”

When Masamichi told Mr. Takanashi, a counselor at his prep school, about the same issues he faced, the man sympathized with him, yet he didn’t give him any specific advice. Shino’s vocabulary was not subtle, and it only contained unrelenting remarks that cut deeply into Masamichi’s heart.

Masamichi admitted it.

“I don’t know. It’s like someone suddenly pulled the rug out from under me and put it away.”

“Humph. That’s what happens when you set objectives in your life based on other people.”

Shino always spoke his mind, but this was the most casual yet scathing comment he had ever made.

Unable to accept it as he usually did, Masamichi defended himself.

“That’s a terrible thing to say. I really love and respect Granddad...my

grandfather, and my parents. I've watched them struggle over the years with various things...like changes in the climate, typhoons, droughts, pests that eat their crops, and pricing their goods. So...I wanted to do something, work in an area that would help these people who I love. That's normal, isn't it? At least, I think it's normal for humans!"

"I couldn't care less what humans think," Shino said bluntly, leaned back in his seat, and cast a sidelong glance at Masamichi. "But now there will be nothing for you to do since your father and grandfather have changed their way of life. So is that the right way to define your future?"

"...I..."

"Masamichi. You are my servant. My orders come first and foremost, and that will never change. You must obey my orders at all times and act in my best interests."

Masamichi nodded vaguely at this somewhat cruel declaration.

Sure, he was right. Masamichi had promised to devote his body, mind, and soul to Shino when they agreed to their contract.

But he doesn't have to say that now of all times...

Masamichi looked bewildered as Shino said quietly, "Still, you must have some time left in your life for yourself."

"Huh?!"

"As long as I allow it, you have time for yourself in addition to the time you spend obeying and serving me. You can learn, go out, get to know other humans... Whatever you want. You are neither my puppet nor my faithful dog waiting for my orders. You have time to nurture and grow yourself. Isn't that right?"

Masamichi subconsciously straightened his posture.

"...Yes, sir," he responded politely.

"It's fine to learn things for the sake of your parents and your grandfather. It's good to try to be useful to them. But don't make it the purpose of your life. Regardless of their position, all living things, whether they're humans or

specters, essentially live for themselves.”

Shino stopped and pointed at his own chest with a reproachful look on his face.

“I became Tokifuyu’s slave and was sealed in this cramped vessel. A thousand years have passed since he died, and yet I’m still his servant. I’m still bound by the curse he put on me. But I have never, not even for a second, existed for Tokifuyu’s sake. Even now, I’m living my time with my own will.”

There was no pity or contempt in Shino’s voice.

He wasn’t boasting, pushing, or admonishing. He was only making a stern statement of the facts with a soul as tough as steel.

Because of that, each word he said etched itself more strongly and deeply into Masamichi’s heart than any others before.

Unlike harsh words that might pierce like a spear, they spread gently and quietly through Masamichi’s heart, like rain soaking into dry soil.

“Shino...”

“You told me about your family’s situation because I’m the one who’s paying your prep school tuition. Am I wrong?”

Instead of answering that he wasn’t, Masamichi nodded.

His reason and motivation for pursuing a degree in agriculture had suddenly vanished. Although he continued to study diligently for his entrance exam, Masamichi wondered if it was really okay for him to keep going down this path.

But it wasn’t as if there was another area of study that interested him, in which case, he wondered if he should give up on college. Various thoughts were going through his mind, and Masamichi had discussed the possibility with Mr. Takanashi during his recent interview.

But Mr. Takanashi had cut the interview short, suggesting that he first think it through himself or discuss it with his parents.

“Going to prep school, I think I’ve really begun to enjoy studying. But...my desire to study agriculture...has become shaky, and I don’t think it’s right to go on like this, but I’m not so flexible that I can quickly change directions. I feel

sorry having you pay for my tuition while I'm in such a halfhearted state—"

"It's fine," Shino said, not waiting for Masamichi to finish. "If you enjoy studying, then continue going to prep school. You can set a new goal if you find something you want to do. If it's something you can learn at a college, then apply to the necessary department. If not, you can quit at that time. You don't have to make a choice now, and I know you don't have the ability to make a decision like that."

"I haven't been able to make up my mind, and it's exactly as you say. But I don't know if it's okay to take my time like that."

For the first time, Shino flashed a wicked grin.

"You already failed your college entrance exam and wasted a year. A year or two more won't make much difference."

"Ngh...! You're my sponsor, so if you say so...but still..."

"Masamichi." The grin left Shino's face, and he said seriously, "Set as many paths as you want in the direction that you want. There is no need to go to only one destination. If that isn't where you truly want to be, then find the next one."

"...O-okay."

"As your master, I will keep a sharp eye out on which way you go. But don't make that an excuse for *not choosing* or *being unable to choose* for yourself. If you care about your people, then don't lean on them. Don't let them hold you back. First, stand on your own two thin legs." Masamichi's eyes slowly began to well with tears. He hadn't expected Shino to give him such sincere advice. Noticing his reaction, Shino turned away and clicked his tongue dismissively. "There's a saying that goes, *A dwarf does evil in his spare time*. I'm not a dwarf, but it seems that I do outlandish things when I have too much time on my hands. I lectured you just now, which isn't my style."

"You didn't lecture me!" Masamichi said quickly as he wiped his eyes with the tips of his fingers. "I...I was surprised, but I was very happy. I'll think hard about what you said during this trip—I mean, during and after this trip."

"Do what you want."

Shino continued to look away, and he responded like he couldn't care less—a complete change from what he had just said.

With a tearful smile on his face, Masamichi whispered a heartfelt “Thank you” to his master, who seemed to be shier than he was willing to admit...

The plane carrying them landed safely at Heathrow Airport, London, at around four PM local time—about twelve hours after takeoff.

As it turned out, Masamichi had spent most of his flight time—except during meals—sleeping, catching up on his lack of rest the night before.

Although he regretted missing out on most of the in-flight services, Masamichi had enjoyed the comfort of his business-class seat. Feeling genuinely refreshed, he followed Shino's lead through the airport.

It was often said that airports had their unique smells, but there seemed to be no particular smell at Heathrow.

When Masamichi mentioned it, Shino's expression showed that he thought it was nonsense. Still, he asked, “What kind of stench did you expect to find at this airport anyway?”

“Huh?! ‘Stench’? I thought maybe there'd be an elegant scent since this *is* England...”

“Be specific.”

“I don't know how to describe it. Let's see...like tea, for example?”

“That's silly. Your ideas are mediocre and cheap.”

“Ngh.”

Feeling somewhat hurt but also experiencing a strange sense of relief that Shino was dismissing him as usual rather than giving him sincere advice again, Masamichi joined him in the long line at immigration.

After getting through, they picked up their baggage, went out to the arrival lobby, and realized that quite a while had passed since the plane touched down.

The lobby was crowded with travelers and people waiting for them.

At almost the same time that Masamichi got on his toes and started looking

around, Christopher Selwyn appeared and called out Shino's name.

He looked sleek in his suit, more so here on his home turf than in Japan, and his dashing smile was about 30 percent brighter.

"Welcome to London! I was going to make a board with your names on it, but I've been rather swamped with work...though it wasn't necessary after all. It's nice to see you again, Mr. Tatsumi and...Mr. Adachi, correct?"

Masamichi's eyes widened in surprise at the mention of his name, as he had not had a chance to introduce himself when they last met.

"I got your name when I was arranging your plane tickets and hotel accommodations." With a smile, Selwyn quickly answered Masamichi's unasked question.

"Oh, right. But I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself properly. I'm Masamichi Adachi. Thank you for inviting me along with Shino..."

"Never mind the chitchat," Shino said. "What are we going to do now?" he asked Selwyn.

Selwyn smiled at Masamichi as if to reassure him that it was okay, then became serious and reached for Shino's suitcase.

"I'll take you to your hotel. If you aren't too tired, Lord Johnston would like you to have dinner with him."

Shino furrowed his brow a fraction.

"What about work?"

"I will take you to the terraced house tomorrow afternoon. First, I would like you to get some rest after your long journey."

"I'm not particularly tired, but if that's all right with you, then fine."

"This way, then."

Shino passed his suitcase to Selwyn as if it was only natural. As he pulled it with his right hand, Selwyn reached for Masamichi's luggage with his left hand. Masamichi quickly held it closer to himself and said, "It's okay. I can carry this myself."

“...Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“As you wish,” Selwyn’s lovely smile seemed to say, and the man began walking, rolling Shino’s suitcase along the floor.

As he wove his way through the crowd, Selwyn kept turning around to make sure that Shino and Masamichi were following. His actions seemed typical of a competent secretary.

The air-conditioning worked well inside the airport, but once they were outside, it was surprisingly hot.

However, it wasn’t as humid as in Japan, and the temperature seemed a little lower.

As if to affirm Masamichi’s impression, Selwyn glanced back and called out to him.

“I think the heat should be a little less brutal than summer in Japan. It was difficult wearing a jacket there when I visited, and I found myself sweating an awful lot in front of your store.”

“You did?! You looked very cool and comfortable,” Masamichi said, surprised, and Selwyn laughed.

“I’m human, too, so I sweat when it’s hot. Summer in Japan is much hotter than I remembered.”

Chatting amicably, Selwyn led them to a cabstand.

“This is much more comfortable and safer than for me to drive you in a limousine. After you.”

Following that quick excuse, Selwyn had a brief exchange with the driver, then opened the back door for Shino and Masamichi.

He explained that although the same type of cab could recently be seen in Japan, all official taxis at London airports were black cabs. The drivers had passed strict tests and were thoroughly familiar with the geography of London.

“It’s really spacious!” Masamichi exclaimed as he settled next to Shino and

looked around with admiration.

Like Japanese cabs, the furnishings were simple, but the ceiling was high and spacious.

There was no sense of being closed-in, even with the auxiliary seats out and Selwyn sitting across from the two of them.

I guess the driving...is okay, too, though I don't know what the legal speed limit is on London roads, Masamichi mused as he glanced at the driver with a little anxiety.

A plastic screen separated the rear seats and the driver's seat. It was probably a security measure, but they could talk to the driver if they wanted.

Masamichi looked over and saw Selwyn giving Shino his trademark smile. "The hotel is in the city of London. It's late in the evening, so we'll have a bit of a traffic jam, but I think it should be about an hour's trip," Selwyn said.

"...Hmph."

Looking exasperated, Shino closed his eyes.

Masamichi, however, was intrigued by the view out the window.

The scenery changed drastically about ten minutes after they left the airport.

Bright-green pastures passed by, and flocks of sheep grazed here and there. He saw rolling hills, stone cottages scattered about, and a church steeple in the distance with a cross at the top.

Masamichi's eyes lit up at the idyllic scene; it was just like a picture book.

He knew he shouldn't disturb Shino's rest; still, he couldn't help but exclaim with glee.

"Wow, sheep! With black faces. They're the ones I often see on TV..."

Selwyn hadn't expected Masamichi to get excited like this. He tilted his head curiously and whispered, "Mr. Adachi, are sheep that rare to you?"

Embarrassed, Masamichi replied, "It isn't just the sheep. I didn't think I'd get to see this kind of scenery unless we went far into the countryside. I never imagined there'd be sheep near the airport..."

Selwyn nodded as if that made sense to him. “There are places like this all over the country. Sheep are cute, but it hurts very much when they head-butt you,” he said, leaning closer to Masamichi with a serious look on his face, which made Masamichi laugh.

“Did you do something to get head-butted by sheep?”

“I was young. Young and indiscreet. It was totally my fault for teasing sheep.”

“Oh...well.”

“You be careful when you’re around sheep, Mr. Adachi.”

Perhaps because they were meeting for the second time, or possibly because Selwyn thought Shino was asleep since his eyes were closed, the Englishman’s tone was a little softer than when they met in Japan.

“Do you live in London, Mr. Selwyn?” Masamichi asked hesitantly, aware that he might not like being asked personal questions, but Selwyn answered without hesitation.

“Yes, I do, because when Lord Johnston wants to see me, I have to come to him immediately. The rent in London is high, so I have a flatshare. Do you know what that is?”

“‘Share’... Oh, do you share a house with other people?”

“That’s right. We have a common living room and bathroom. I use the second floor, and someone else lives on the third floor.”

“I see.”

This time, Selwyn asked Masamichi, “What about you, Mr. Adachi? As Mr. Tatsumi’s assistant, do you live near Bougyoudou?”

“Oh, no, I have a room on the second floor of the store.”

“Oh, you live right there, then. You know, I saw on your travel documents that you’re twenty years old. I thought you were younger, around seventeen or eighteen, with that cute face of yours.”

Masamichi blushed.

“People...often say that. I guess I have a baby face. It’s also probably because I

don't look like a dependable, mature adult."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way at all!"

Selwyn waved his hands, looking a little flustered.

"I'm sorry, it was rude of me to say you have a cute face. Please forgive me. You must be very competent for Mr. Tatsumi to bring you all the way to London at your age."

With Selwyn's overestimation of his abilities, Masamichi's face turned redder and redder.

"Oh, I'm not competent at all. Mr. Selwyn, you look young yourself, and you're the secretary of a count. You're the one who must be very competent..."

"I have a baby face, too. I'm thirty-two. Lord Johnston does various types of work, and he has several secretaries, a specialized one for each type of work."

"Oh, I see. And you..."

"I help with his antique business. I graduated from an art school. This time, I'm looking after you and Mr. Tatsumi and serving as an interpreter since I can speak Japanese. By the way..."

"Yes?"

"...you can call me Chris. A secretary and an assistant must work together while you're in London, right? We'll get along just fine," Selwyn said with a smile.

Humbled that Selwyn, someone older than him, was suggesting working together when Masamichi must clearly look immature, Masamichi bowed.

"Thank you, Mr. Selwyn... Mr. Chris."

"You're welcome. Just *Chris* is fine."

"You're older, so I'd like to call you Mr. Chris. Please call me Masamichi."

"*Masamichi-san*."

The name seemed a little difficult for Selwyn to pronounce, and he repeated the name a few times. Masamichi quickly said, "No *san*, just Masamichi, please. I'm younger."

“Well, I’ve heard that when doing business, Japanese people don’t often call each other by their names without an honorific. I don’t want to offend Mr. Tatsumi, so let’s leave it at Mr. Masamichi.”

He’s so thoughtful. What a nice man...

Relieved that Selwyn was being so friendly, Masamichi asked again about something that had been bothering him but that he hadn’t had a chance to ask.

“Uh, about the sheep you were talking about... What did you do to annoy them?”

Selwyn’s blue eyes widened in surprise.

“You must really be intrigued by sheep,” he said with amusement. “I confess. I was young. I was imitating sheep cries for a long time, and they became annoyed. I must have been really bad.”

“...Is that what it was about?!”

“I learned that it isn’t good to be too persistent. Oh, look, Mr. Masamichi. There’s a cow out there.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Do you like cows, too?”

“Uh...maybe not so much.”

“Ah. That’s a shame.”

Selwyn, both a good talker and a good listener, continued to chat with Masamichi about other things and asked him questions that weren’t too personal.

Not being a particularly skilled conversationalist, Masamichi felt awkward at first, but he gradually became comfortable with Selwyn’s willingness to listen to him and began to enjoy the conversation.

Eventually, Selwyn lightly tapped the partition between the driver’s seat and the passenger seats and said something to the driver in rapid-fire English.

He appeared to have asked him to slow down, and the cab decelerated just enough so it wouldn’t disturb the flow of the other motorists on the road.

“Mr. Tatsumi, may I have a word?”

Selwyn had spoken to Masamichi in a casual tone, but he remained polite with Shino.

Shino hadn't moved an inch, and his eyes had been closed, but he didn't seem to have been napping. He immediately opened his eyes and responded, “What?”

“We will soon be passing by Lord Johnston's terraced house. We aren't going inside until tomorrow, but could you take a quick look at it from the outside?”

“All right.”

“It will be on the right side. This place...is an upscale residential area.”

There were no huge mansions on the street, but all the houses were elegant works of architecture.

There were country cottages, semidetached houses with symmetrical designs, flats with stylish decorations, and terraced houses.

All the houses had bay windows facing the street, displaying chic pieces of art or covered with beautiful, flowing curtains.

The gardens in front of the houses were modest, but beautiful flowers bloomed behind elaborate gates and porches, adding to the appeal for the beholder.

Eventually, Selwyn pointed outside the window.

“That's the one. The house on the right is Lord Johnston's.”

“Wow.”

As Masamichi voiced his adoration for the house, Shino simply looked at it without a word. It was almost exactly like the photo he'd seen.

The brick walls were a darker red than the photo. The marble decorations were grayish but much more beautiful in the sunlight.

The most wonderful feature was the large sunroom, which was probably what had captured Lord Johnston's heart.

Masamichi could just make out a wicker chair behind the shimmering old-

fashioned glass windows.

It sure would be nice to sit in the sun there. It doesn't look like anything bad could be in there...at least from the outside.

Masamichi glanced at Shino, who was staring silently at the house.

His beautifully shaped profile was devoid of emotion.

Admiring his milky-white skin under the light of the setting sun against the backdrop of the scenery outside, Masamichi thought he looked like an oil painting.

Despite the car decelerating, they soon passed by the house, which disappeared from view, even from the rear window.

"I think it will be another fifteen or twenty minutes," Selwyn said. "Please sit back and enjoy the rest of the ride."

Shino closed his eyes again without saying anything.

Meanwhile, Masamichi continued to watch the ever-changing view of the city and was far from being bored...

The cab finally came to a stop in front of a stately building on Piccadilly street in central London.

Dressed in an ornate jacket despite the summer heat, the doorman immediately opened the car door.

Masamichi set out to unload his luggage from the cab, but Selwyn gently stopped him.

"That's the porter's job, Mr. Masamichi. You don't have to do anything."

Masamichi stopped in his tracks. "Oh...okay."

Indeed, a young man in proper attire unloaded their suitcases from the cab and efficiently carried them inside the hotel.

Masamichi realized that this was a first-class hotel—as could be guessed by its exterior.

Again, I'm out of my league here...

Feeling dizzy, Masamichi followed Selwyn's lead and stepped inside the hotel behind Shino, who was very much in his element.

The entrance had a revolving door that prevented too many people from entering at once.

As Masamichi wondered if this was a safety precaution, Selwyn said in his usual pleasant tone, "This is The Ritz London, where Lord Johnston has short stays. We've booked a junior suite for you. I was told that you would share a suite—is that okay?"

Shino nodded slightly in agreement, as if it was a matter of course.

"Very well. I will check you in if you won't mind waiting here."

Selwyn led them to the lobby, which was much more spacious than the small entrance, prompted them to sit on the sofa, and then headed for the front desk.

His moves were smooth, suggesting he was very familiar with this place. He appeared to know the front-desk staff, and they began speaking with each other in a friendly manner.

Masamichi felt restless, and he couldn't help looking around.

In the center of the lobby was an ornately decorated and gilded circular table—one that you might find somewhere like the Palace of Versailles—topped with a huge marble vase of flowers.

A profusion of red and pink roses was arranged in the vase, giving off a sweet fragrance that wafted throughout the lobby.

The high ceilings, crystal-glass chandeliers, carpets, curtains, and other furnishings were, in Masamichi's somewhat meager vocabulary, a scene from "the good life."

Masamichi felt like a commoner who had just wandered in on the aristocracy. He felt terribly out of place, and his hands trembled.

"Shino. Is it really okay for me to stay here?"

"Not again," Shino said as he sat back on the sofa and looked at Masamichi, who was clearly deflated for a second time after seeing his business-class seat

on the flight over. “Tokifuyu said a place makes a person.”

“Huh?!”

It seemed odd to hear the name of Shino’s late master in London.

Masamichi forgot his nerves for a moment as Shino continued in a tone that was as close to calm as you could expect from the specter.

“He said anywhere you put yourself will eventually become suitable for you as long as you stay there. Therefore, he said it was necessary to visit various places and dragged me around.”

“...Heh-heh!”

“Don’t laugh. It was a nuisance, but because of it, I have never felt timid wherever I went. Not that any location in the world would make me shy.”

Indeed, Shino’s usual boldness was starting to ease Masamichi’s tension.

“Wouldn’t that be *thanks to him* instead of *because of it*?”

“As if I would be grateful to him,” he said with annoyance, then continued with the same force, “When you passed by that terraced house or whatever it’s called, did you feel anything?”

Masamichi shook his head anxiously.

“Not in particular. What about you?”

“I felt something—something like the buzzing of a winged insect. But...never mind. We’ll check tomorrow.”

Shino didn’t usually say anything he wasn’t sure of. The fact that he stopped midway suggested that he hadn’t yet found a clue to unravel the mystery of the terraced house.

Oh yeah, I’ve gotten carried away with all that’s been happening, but we came here to exorcise the house. I have to calm down...and try to be as useful to Shino as I can.

Masamichi still felt out of his element, but his master’s words—that a place made a person—were a small relief and a ray of hope.

This is a rare opportunity I’ve been given. It will be a great experience...!

Telling himself that, Masamichi inhaled the scent of roses and took several deep breaths...

CHAPTER 4

Beings in the Darkness

“Gaaah!”

As soon as he entered the suite he shared with Shino, Masamichi fell onto his bed, and a strange sound came out of his mouth that was neither a scream nor a cry of anguish.

Shino sat down on his own bed, carelessly loosened his tie, and shot Masamichi a chilly stare.

“What’s all the fuss?”

Burying his face in a soft, large feather pillow, Masamichi whined:

“I’m pooped. I think I’m more exhausted than when I took my college entrance exam.”

Shino yanked off his tie and tossed it onto Masamichi’s back as the young man lay on his bed. Then he removed his well-tailored jacket and threw that on top of his servant as well.

“Fool. Who gets that exhausted just by eating a meal?”

“But...it was a super-fancy dinner with a real aristocrat in a private suite in a prestigious hotel! I don’t know about you, but it has to be the first and last time that I’ll ever do something like this.”

Despite grumbling, Masamichi realized he couldn’t lie on his bed with his master’s jacket covering him. He also remembered that he was still wearing the suit that Shino had bought for him for this trip—off-the-rack but certainly nice enough—and jumped up with the agility of a boxer recovering after a fall.

“Food is only food, wherever and whoever you eat with,” Shino said arrogantly, undoing the buttons on his shirt.

Even Shino, who was supposed to be familiar with wearing the Heian attire of nobles, seemed to find the three-piece suit a little uncomfortable.

Masamichi got up from his bed and hung Shino's jacket on a hanger, quite moved that Shino didn't have a trace of embarrassment about stripping in front of him.

"Come to think of it, you said we didn't have to dress up when Mr. Chris came to Bougyoudou, but tonight, you wore a suit and even a vest. You looked really cool, but I thought you'd go to dinner wearing something casual."

Shino took off his shirt, dexterously tossed it onto Masamichi's bed, and said, "I wouldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"It's a matter of domain."

"Domain?"

Not immediately comprehending, Masamichi parroted what Shino said.

Shino removed his undershirt, exposed his well-proportioned upper body, and said as if it should be common sense, "When I first met Selwyn, I was in my domain, where I do things my way. But this time, it's different. We're in Lord Johnston's domain, and that means you and I should do things his way."

"Oh, I know what you mean. That's *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*, right?!"

"Precisely. You got that quick, considering what a dimwit you are."

"I did!"

Masamichi hung Shino's shirt and tie on the same hanger as his jacket, placed the specter's undershirt in a laundry bag, and muttered, "I thought self-righteousness was your style, but I guess I was wrong. You behave according to what's expected of you—or maybe I should say you're considerate of others..."

"Of course I am. *Domain* may be an elegant way to put it, but listen, we're talking about territory. In one's territory, one has strangers abide by one's rules, and in someone else's territory, one follows their rules—if they aren't trying to compete over ownership of territory, that is."

“I don’t know about our hosts, but I’m really glad you aren’t trying to fight over their territory.” Masamichi smiled and gazed at Shino, then blushed and quickly turned the other way.

Shino had undressed with surprising speed, so he was practically naked, wearing only a pair of boxer shorts and socks.

“H-hey, Sh-Shino, are you stripping in front of me, your servant?”

“What’s wrong with that? And why are you blushing? This body is just a fake vessel.”

“I know, but that isn’t how it looks.”

Despite looking away, Masamichi’s gaze kept returning to Shino, who remained seated on his bed.

He was like an infant before a bath but also a magnificent “vessel” that Tokifuyu Tatsumi had painstakingly made.

I can’t say this out loud, but his body...and his face...are probably much better looking than a statue of David, Masamichi thought as he praised Shino’s body—er, vessel—in his mind.

Never mind that he and Shino were both men; perhaps because Shino was a specter, not human, his naked body was simultaneously sexy and reminiscent of a spectacular piece of art.

Shino passed him his slacks mechanically as if they were in an assembly line. Deciding to iron them later, Masamichi hung them on a hanger, put them in the closet, and sighed.

He really is beautiful.

It was easy to attribute it to Shino’s artificial exterior being a “vessel,” but his entire body was as white as snow without a single mole, blemish, or scar.

His skin was flawless beyond what was possible for a human being.

Humans training their bodies from scratch would surely be imbalanced somewhere, but Shino’s supple muscles were evenly balanced throughout his body, set on a sturdy frame that was perfectly symmetrical.

Shino told him that Tokifuyu had made his “vessel” so that it could reach objects in high places and easily handle tough jobs, but that couldn’t be all.

If the figures depicted in the picture scrolls of the Heian period reflected the standards of beauty at the time, Shino’s facial features went completely against them.

He’s more of a modern beauty.

Pondering such thoughts, Masamichi brought a thick, fluffy guest bathrobe from the bathroom and offered it to Shino.

“Why don’t you put this on if you’re going to relax?”

As he handed him the bathrobe, Masamichi recalled Selwyn mentioning during dinner that this hotel was like heaven to him, with air-conditioning throughout the property.

Shino had looked at him suspiciously, wondering what the big deal was, and Selwyn explained—in English to Lord Johnston and in Japanese to Shino and Masamichi—that English summers were usually cooler, and while most homes had heating, many still didn’t have air conditioners.

“My home doesn’t have air-conditioning, either,” he had said. “When I come back from work in the evening, my flat—it’s accumulated all that daytime heat, and it’s truly hell. Oh, but that isn’t because Lord Johnston doesn’t pay me enough. It’s because my flat is very old, and we can’t use air conditioners because of voltage problems.”

Masamichi had been tense and stiff in front of Lord Johnston, but Selwyn’s small talk had helped him relax a little.

“The air conditioner works great, and it’s really cool and comfortable here, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to stroll around naked. I understand that specters aren’t worried about getting chilly or catching a cold, but still,” Masamichi said.

“Of course we don’t. Don’t compare me with weak humans. But this bathrobe...is quite comfortable.”

This specter seemed to like the feel of the fluffy bathrobe.

“Considering your state, why don’t you take a bath now? Do you want me to draw one for you?”

Masamichi closed the closet door and was about to go to the bathroom when Shino stopped him and pointed to the sofa.

He was telling him to sit down.

Lord Johnston had booked a junior suite for them, and although it wasn’t as spacious as Masamichi had expected, it was quite luxurious.

The ceiling was surprisingly high, and beyond the large floor-to-ceiling windows was a small balcony overlooking Piccadilly.

The ample curtains were draped and tied elegantly with huge tassels, and inside the room, there were beautiful light stands that provided indirect lighting.

The furnishings were considerably different from Shino’s and Masamichi’s tastes. To borrow Masamichi’s words, they “looked like things that Marie Antoinette might have had,” and each chair was upholstered with a different floral pattern.

There was a magnificent—but only decorative—marble fireplace, a writing desk, a vanity with a large mirror, a closet, a TV stand, two semidouble beds, and a fine sofa set in the suite.

It would have easily become cluttered with so many things crammed into a limited amount of space, but the pure-white walls and ceiling gave the room a clean, open look.

The sofa that Shino had pointed to was a three-seater against the wall.

“...You want me to sit there?”

I would have liked to change into something a little more comfortable...

But at any rate, Masamichi took off his jacket and placed it over the back of a chair, then moved toward the middle of the sofa as ordered.

Just as he was about to take a seat, Shino added, “Sit on the edge.”

“H-huh? Oh, are you going to sit here, too?”

Knowing his answer, Masamichi shuffled over to the end of the sofa and sat down as Shino walked toward him.

He was puzzled. There were other chairs with large armrests and a chair with a high back that would be good for reading or napping, so Masamichi wondered why Shino wanted to sit next to him. Then for some reason, Shino moved an unnatural distance away from Masamichi and sat on the sofa himself.

And...

...Masamichi shrieked when he realized that Shino had laid his head on his servant's thighs.

"Wh-wh...what the heck?!"

He didn't jump despite the shock because it would be bad to let his master's head drop.

"Don't move."

With that order, Shino rested his head on Masamichi's lap and lay on the large sofa. His long legs didn't quite fit, so he set his heels on the soft, low armrest.

Wait. Wait just a second. He's put his head on my lap. I've never...done anything like this or had anyone do it to me.

"Um, Shino, this, uh..."

Ignoring Masamichi's panic, Shino let out a small breath and closed his eyes.

"Don't let something as small as this disturb you. You're disturbing your chi."

"Oh...s-sorry. Okay, I get it."

It wasn't as if Masamichi had expected to share sweet moments with Shino, but the tension left his body when he realized this was just a way for the specter to nourish himself.

For specters, humans were exquisite food that was efficient, nutritious, and tasty.

Shino had eaten humans in the past, and he said there were still times when he craved human flesh and blood, which was as sweet as nectar to him.

But after his late master, Tokifuyu Tatsumi, put a curse on him that forbade him from attacking and eating humans, all he could do now was take in his servant's—Masamichi's—chi in place of flesh and blood.

Back at Bougyoudou, Shino usually called Masamichi to his room and had him sleep there with him.

If Masamichi was relaxed, his chi naturally flowed into Shino as they lay next to each other, quenching some of Shino's thirst.

Masamichi had never slept with a stranger—let alone a specter—since he slept with his mother as a child. He'd been terribly nervous at the beginning and had trouble getting his chi out for Shino to devour.

Masamichi still had no control over the way he produced his chi or how strong it was, but Shino wasn't as harsh as usual when he was resting. When the mood struck, he would tell Masamichi about his past or listen to his tales.

It brought back memories of overnight school trips, where he'd enjoyed chatting with his friends after lights out. Eventually, Masamichi started secretly looking forward to the nights he spent in Shino's bed.

The first night had been frightening. Shino had almost raped Masamichi, who'd been shocked and terrified, but after Masamichi summoned all his courage and rejected him, it was the last time anything like that happened.

Of course, it was because Tokifuyu's curse would not allow it. But Masamichi felt that it was Shino's way of making things right, and...although the specter would be furious if Masamichi said this, it also seemed to be a show of Shino's kindness.

Masamichi was certainly stunned by the sudden weight on his lap, but it wasn't uncomfortable. In fact, he was glad to have a quiet moment here in London, where they'd come on business.

"...Are you comfortable, Shino? I may look like a weakling, but I *am* a guy, and that can't feel good since my knee bones stick out."

"No problem," Shino said with his eyes closed.

"Yeah? Good. Oh...excuse me for just a moment."

He reached for a nearby cushion and placed it behind his back to make himself comfortable, then looked down at Shino's face.

"Everything is gorgeous at this hotel, and that private room where we had dinner was no exception. Everything was red—the walls, the chairs, the curtains, and the flowers, napkins, and candles. It was like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*."

"I don't think it's good taste, but it was certainly bold."

"Uh-huh."

Hearing Shino's ruthless remark, Masamichi giggled.

They were in a hotel room in a foreign land that was far too luxurious for Masamichi to feel at home, but his tension slowly eased when he was alone with Shino like this.

Perhaps because of the indirect lighting, the room was dimly lit, and talking with Shino like this was similar to sleeping with him at Bougyoudou.

"It felt like I was being treated to a feast inside a castle I read about when I was a child," Masamichi mused.

"The guidebook you bought said the food wasn't very good in England...," Shino said, slowly opening his eyes and staring back at Masamichi. "Tonight's dinner wasn't bad. They didn't do too much with the ingredients, but I liked it. They go overboard with the furnishings here, but the food seems to be rather simple."

"The way you say that! But I think I get what you mean. The presentation of the dishes was elaborate and beautiful, but the food itself was simple and easy to understand, like smoked stuff and roasts. Too bad—I could have enjoyed the tastes more if I hadn't been so nervous."

"What's there to be nervous about?"

"A lot! Like my manners and etiquette."

"Ridiculous. Lord Johnston himself said the deep-fried potatoes served with the roast beef were best to eat with your fingers and demonstrated."

"Oh yeah, that's right." Laughing, Masamichi said, "I assumed that Lord

Johnston was an old man, but I was surprised that he was still young, only thirty-six. I can understand that he'd chat casually with you, but I didn't expect him to talk to me so openly. I never knew when he'd turn the conversation to me, and that was another reason why I was nervous throughout dinner..."

"Rubbish."

"You seemed to have fun talking with him," Masamichi said happily, recalling the meal.

Knowing the grumpy specter, he had been afraid that Shino might be rude to Lord Johnston.

And it figured that when the earl showed up in a well-tailored suit and welcomed the two of them with great hospitality, Shino didn't even smile when he shook the aristocrat's hand and said nothing in return when Lord Johnston said he was pleased to meet them.

But once dinner began, Shino and the earl started talking about Japanese tableware and engaged in lively discussion, particularly about something called "Kurawanka bowls," which Masamichi had never heard of.

Lord Johnston spoke in English and Shino in Japanese, with Selwyn interpreting and turning to Masamichi now and then with a look that told him that this was tough work.

"I thought he was a man who valued antiques strictly for their monetary value, but to be fascinated by Edo pottery—he seems to have good taste," Shino said, making Masamichi blink in surprise.

"This is the first time I've heard you praise someone besides Daizo and Yoriko."

"Don't underestimate your master. Whether human or specter or a bird flying by, I can approve of any being that has potential."

"Then I'd better make an effort so I don't let a bird flying by outdo me and you can praise me someday."

Shino looked surprised by the remark and frowned slightly.

"I always praise you. I'm always telling you that your chi is delicious."

“I can’t take credit for that. It’s thanks to my parents and my grandparents, who raised me in a laid-back environment, and eating lots of delicious vegetables.”

“Hmm, that makes sense. In that case, go ahead and make those efforts. By the way...why are you touching me?”

“Huh? Oh. Whoa! Sorry!”

Masamichi was stupefied...and the next moment, his hands shot up in the air like someone yelling banzai.

He wasn’t aware that he’d been combing Shino’s wavy hair with his fingers as the specter lay his head on Masamichi’s lap.

“I didn’t tell you to apologize. I only asked you why you touched me.”

As Shino stared into Masamichi’s face, he didn’t seem particularly offended.

“Yeah. Well...um...”

Masamichi pulled back his hand with a confused look on his face and thought for a moment before answering:

“Your hair feels really good, like I’m touching a strand of silk thread... I guess that’s why.”

Then Shino closed his eyes again.

“The intensity and sweetness of your chi increased when you were touching my hair. You can touch my hair all you want, and it won’t diminish. Keep going if you like it so much.”

“...Are you sure?”

“I don’t mind.”

His permission was unexpected. Or rather, perhaps it was more accurate to say Shino was prompting Masamichi to touch his hair. Thus, Masamichi began running his fingers through it again.

As he combed Shino’s soft, slick hair with his fingers, Masamichi began feeling like he was petting a huge dog—not that he was trying to be haughty.

Shino didn’t seem to mind it, either. He looked rather comfortable as he gave

Masamichi free rein with his hair.

Relieved, Masamichi gradually began moving his fingers in a leisurely, relaxed manner. As if responding to his mindset, Masamichi's whole body began to be enveloped in a pale-golden light.

That was what Shino called Masamichi's chi.

He had the same rare golden chi as the late Tokifuyu Tatsumi, and it eventually covered Shino's tall body like a blanket.

Is this what Shino means when he says my chi has become thick and sweet? But...why? Is it because I feel relaxed when I'm near Shino and touch him?

After meeting Shino, Masamichi had come to understand that his body emitted chi, though he knew little about it.

He was sure that the important thing was to relax in mind and body, but he had no idea about the other factors that affected the quantity and quality of a person's chi.

There are so many things that I don't know.

Shino's soft voice broke Masamichi out of his daze.

"I was convinced during dinner. Lord Johnston isn't possessed by anything."

Masamichi gasped. Realizing that they were talking about work again, he tensed the muscles in his face.

"Oh, um, right. I didn't feel anything peculiar from him, either. He seemed really vigorous and full of life."

"Don't stop moving your fingers. Indeed, Lord Johnston has potent chi. That's a natural gift, a strong protective power. Darkness is attracted to light, but it can't get close to light that's too strong, because it will get burned. Furthermore, he's a realist. He's annoyed and inconvenienced by the abnormal situation at his terraced house, but he isn't unnecessarily afraid."

Masamichi agreed:

"I think I understand! He said he wanted us to work on that house so he could quietly relax there and invite guests over with peace of mind as soon as

possible. He didn't say, 'Help, I'm scared.' He seemed like a strong person. If I was in his shoes, I'd be so terrified that I would run away."

Shino flashed a wicked smile.

"Be careful, Masamichi. Those with half-baked chi like you are easy targets for specters."

"Huh?!"

Before Masamichi could say anything, a serious look appeared on Shino's face again.

"So if there *is* something out of the ordinary here, it must be in that house. And it won't come out, which is good."

"Yeah? Because we know it will be in that house for sure?"

"Right. A specter tied to a certain place is easier to target and kill than one that can go anywhere it wants."

"Okay!"

"But there's a saying that a cornered rat will bite a cat. We can never be too careful."

Shino opened his eyes halfway and stared at Masamichi.

"Tomorrow will probably be a long day. Get plenty of rest tonight, since we may need your 'eyes' then."

With that, Shino stopped talking.

Masamichi waited for a while in silence, but there was no sign that Shino would resume the conversation.

With Shino keeping his eyes closed, Masamichi couldn't tell if he was asleep or awake.

Shino says specters don't need sleep, but he seems to be pretty fond of it. The only thing is, I'm not sure if he sleeps like we humans do or if he's just resting with his eyes closed.

When Masamichi stayed in the same bed as Shino, he woke up in the middle of the night to find that Shino was lying properly beside him with his face

straight up and his eyes closed as if standing at attention.

Shino looked like a robot before it was turned on. Worrying about whether he was resting properly, Masamichi would try to peer into his face, and Shino would reach out a hand a moment before he did, saying, “It isn’t dawn yet,” and push him back under the covers.

Masamichi couldn’t tell if he was awake or waking up in response to his surroundings and reacting...

But in either case, he felt sorry for Shino, not knowing the great feeling of being sound asleep and oblivious to anything that happened around him.

Will he be able to sleep really well if I become competent enough to say, “I’ll protect you?” But then again, that day isn’t ever likely to come.

As he pondered such thoughts, Masamichi started feeling drowsy.

Shino told him to get plenty of rest, but he didn’t seem ready to let him go.

Oh, this tie... It’s a shame to undo it after Shino tied it so nicely for me.

Masamichi slowly loosened it, folded it, and placed it on an armrest.

Then he undid the two buttons at the neckline of his shirt, leaned back, and closed his eyes as he stroked Shino’s hair...and his head, just a little, with his fingertips.

It was past one in the afternoon the following day.

Shino, Masamichi, and Selwyn were standing in front of the beautiful terraced house on the outskirts of London.

The Londoner said, “Well, this is the type of weather we have in our country. Weather forecasts aren’t as useful as they are in Japan.” Indeed, the sky had been clear when they awakened that morning, but the clouds had soon begun gathering, and at this moment, the sun was starting to come out.

The sky was clear, but the overcast weather earlier in the day had kept temperatures low and relatively comfortable.

Masamichi had a T-shirt on, figuring he should wear something comfortable that was easy to move around in so he could handle any work that came his

way. He was a little chilly as a result.

Selwyn opened the gate, invited Shino and Masamichi inside, and led the way up the few steps to the entrance porch.

He pressed the classic circular buzzer, and Lord Johnston opened the front door himself.

Even Shino seemed a little surprised to see Lord Johnston standing there in a bright, light-blue suit as he welcomed his Japanese guests with a cheerful, friendly smile.

“Hello, welcome. After experiencing the strange things that have been happening, none of my assistants want to accompany me here, which is why I had no choice but to come alone and wait for you. As a connoisseur of Japanese history and culture, I’m very interested in *onmyoudou*—the esoteric cosmology I believe you specialize in. You won’t mind if I watch you work, will you, Mr. Tatsumi?”

Selwyn translated that, and Shino, looking grumpy, said, “I do not practice onmyoudou,” but he didn’t turn down his client’s wish to observe. “You can watch if you don’t get in my way. However, many specters lurk in the dark even during the day. My visit this afternoon is strictly an advance inspection.”

Selwyn relayed to Lord Johnston what Shino said.

But he’s probably converting it to a more polite version, Masamichi mused as he stood in the entrance and looked around.

The house was quite narrow since five such terraced houses were built together.

Inside, the long and narrow space was reminiscent of the *machiya* town houses in Kyoto, which were called “eel beds.”

The entrance was extremely tight, with a steep staircase right in front of it leading up to the second floor. Below the stairs was a small storage room.

“Okay then, I’ll show you around the house,” Lord Johnston said, apparently unable to hide his excitement as he led his guests to a room by the entrance.

“This is where I live. First, the living room and then the dining room, and

there's the kitchen, which is a step higher than the sunken living room. This one step is a bit of a classic design in my country. Be careful not to trip."

Things! Information! There's too much of it!

That was Masamichi's initial impression upon entering the living room, and it certainly wasn't what he'd expected.

As a resident at Shino's Bougyoudou, Masamichi was used to having too many things around, but he was still taken aback by the living room Lord Johnston said he designed.

Shino stood next to him, looking like he'd just tasted something peculiar.

"It's...gorgeous."

That was the only positive impression that Masamichi could offer.

The place had *pictures everywhere*.

The floor was covered with a large floral-patterned carpet. Various plants and birds were painted on the green wallpaper. The design was intricate but quite oppressive.

Along the wall, at the center of the room, was a huge white marble fireplace with a symmetrical arrangement of lights and objects. Each piece was probably a valuable antique.

The sofa in front of the fireplace was upholstered in a graceful Victorian floral pattern. It was predominantly pink, and a similarly floral-patterned cloth covered the low table. To top it all off, various landscape paintings and illustrations of plants hung on the walls, crowding the place so densely that Masamichi didn't know where to look.

It's a flood of colors and patterns.

Masamichi felt dizzy and put his hand against his forehead.

The only spot where he could rest his eyes and brain in the small room, which was perhaps ten tatami mats in size, was the bay window facing the street.

Lord Johnston must have read the expressions on Shino's and Masamichi's faces and what they wanted to say.

“Ha-ha. This is what happened after I filled it with all the things I liked,” he said as if making an excuse for the clutter, then gestured toward the kitchen.

“Shall I show you the kitchen? It’s functional but with an array of Victorian touches. Best of all is the AGA range cooker I’ve always wanted...”

But before Masamichi could respond, Shino said grimly, “I will walk around as I please. You can follow me, but don’t get in my way.”

Selwyn translated that, and Lord Johnston looked somewhat unsatisfied as he said, “Of course, as you wish. If you have any questions, I’m at your service.”

“Masamichi,” Shino called out in a low tone, and Masamichi walked up to him like a faithful dog.

“This place is done in frighteningly bad taste, but I see nothing else wrong with it,” Shino whispered quickly to Masamichi, not wanting Selwyn to translate what he said.

“I don’t feel anything, either...yet.”

Shino nodded, then putting a little distance between himself, Lord Johnston, and Selwyn, he asked them if the house had a basement.

Selwyn responded right away, not seeing the need to ask his boss.

“No, sir, it doesn’t. Because of the humidity, this house has an extra room in the attic, not the basement.”

“I see. Then we can eliminate the possibility that something is hiding in the basement. All right, let’s proceed to the second floor.”

As Shino spoke, he touched Masamichi’s brow with the tip of his index finger.

“...!”

Masamichi shuddered at the tingling sensation, which felt like an electric current.

Shino had told him about the third eye that was hidden under the skin he had just touched.

It was a mysterious eye that was useless and dormant but could react sensitively to things that were beyond this world.

Fortunately, Masamichi had this third eye but had not yet learned to open it when he wanted, which was why Shino had helped.

Is he suggesting that we'll need this third eye?

Shino answered his unspoken question.

"If it's a specter, then that's my domain. But if it had originally been a human being, then you may feel it more strongly. You go first."

"...Okay!" Masamichi replied enthusiastically despite his usual timidity and walked out of the living room into the entrance area.

He didn't sense anything particularly strange in the hallway with the plain and simple wisteria-colored carpet.

He looked up the stairs with the wooden railing and swallowed hard.

Of course, he was afraid. But he was pushed forward by the thought that he could be useful to Shino, who had saved his life and always casually assisted him despite his tough talk of using him as his servant.

After making sure that Shino was behind him, followed by their client and his secretary, Masamichi began slowly climbing up the stairs.

He thought about going up the stairway all at once, but after just a few steps, a shiver suddenly ran down his spine.

What is this? Now I understand why cats raise the fur on their backs when they're scared.

With each step he took, he had a sense that something was overwhelming him with pressure.

In contrast to the living room, the upstairs floor had the same wisteria carpet as the hall downstairs, but the plaster walls were painted white, which should have provided a clean and refreshing atmosphere.

Yet Masamichi's instincts were crying out for him not to go any farther.

He couldn't help turning around to look at Shino, who jutted his chin forward, which was an order for Masamichi to keep moving.

Unable to understand the reason for the eerie sensation, Masamichi

obediently and carefully climbed up the stairs, gripping the railing firmly.

Ugh, the creepy feeling is getting worse. I'm shivering, like when I have a cold.

His body felt heavy, as if a large, invisible hand was pushing his head down from above.

It was hard for him to breathe, like the oxygen level had suddenly dropped.

And more than anything, a chill swept over his entire body.

Trembling, with goose bumps covering his bare arms, Masamichi somehow managed to get upstairs.

He turned around and saw that Lord Johnston and Selwyn seemed perfectly fine.

"Apparently, they were born lacking the ability to sense this kind of thing. It must be a blessing for them," said Shino, who had come to Masamichi's side. Instead of saying he wished he'd been born that way, too, Masamichi nodded.

"Shino, there's something here, huh?"

The moment he said that, a small still-life picture hanging on the wall suddenly fell to the floor without a sound.

Masamichi cried out:

"Whoa!"

Thanks to the wisteria-colored carpet that covered the upstairs corridor as well, the picture frame didn't crack. But before Masamichi could pull himself together again, he heard a sound from the other side of the half-open door—probably a bathroom—of something falling and shattering.

"Sh-Shino...what the heck...?"

"Well, well. We're already being welcomed."

Shino turned around and gestured to Lord Johnston and Selwyn not to come any closer.

As promised at the start, the two men came to a complete stop halfway up the stairs and quietly waited.

Shino turned his sharp gaze around and calmly told Masamichi what to do.

“Judging by your reaction, I’m guessing that the beings that are nested here were once humans. Walk around on your own and try exploring. I may be too powerful and provoke them.”

“O-okay... I’ll give it a try.”

In addition to the fact that it was Masamichi’s first time in this house, Lord Johnston’s and Selwyn’s curious gazes were making it tough for him to act, but he gathered his courage and began taking cautious steps.

First, he opened the door in front of him.

Sure enough, it was a bathroom. But as soon as Masamichi stepped inside, the toilet lid opened and closed on its own.

“Eep!”

It was unmistakable poltergeist activity.

The crashing sound he’d heard earlier appeared to be a glass mouthwash cup falling to the floor, and the bathtub was littered with glass shards.

I sense something bad... I wonder if whatever it is can’t do anything more drastic because it’s daytime. I don’t think they’ll start attacking me directly.

Frightened but surprised at how calm a part of him was, Masamichi left the bathroom and went into the next room.

“It’s a bedroom.”

The room was about eight tatami mats in size—rather small for a noble’s bedroom.

Still, the bed in the center was made of heavy wood adorned with detailed carving, and it had a canopy. It was a magnificent piece of furniture.

The walls, carpet, and bedding were all green, reflecting Lord Johnston’s taste, and the patterns were very lively.

There were no paintings in this room, but many pots of rare-looking plants made the interior unique.

“Whoa! Here, too?”

A large pot right next to him fell over, and Masamichi moved to the side, startled.

Damp soil spilled onto the carpet from the fallen pot, creating another reason for Masamichi, who liked to keep things tidy, to groan.

“Oh, no. That carpet looks expensive...”

The words came out without any thought, but of course, this was not the time to start cleaning the house. Feeling a little sorry about not taking care of the mess, Masamichi looked around the room, made sure that nothing else was out of the ordinary, and left.

Shino was standing at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall. His eyes met Masamichi’s, and he turned his gaze to the end of the hallway.

Masamichi nodded and opened the door at the end of the hall.

“...Wow...!”

There it was, the huge sunroom that had made the strongest impression on him when he first saw a photograph of this house.

From the floor to the high ceiling, many shimmering glass panels were fitted into the sturdy steel frame, which arched loosely at the top.

Although the view wasn’t as good as the large all-glass windows in modern buildings, plenty of sunlight poured in, and it was so hot in the approximately six-tatami-mat-sized room that he felt dizzy as soon as he stepped inside.

Masamichi had been shivering with cold until a moment ago, but sweat broke out on his skin immediately.

This room...is safe.

He wondered if the overwhelming chi of sunlight was too powerful for the specters that nestled in the house to compete with.

Masamichi had felt oppressed, but the feeling seemed to vanish as soon as he entered the sunroom, and he took a deep breath.

The pale yellow-green wallpaper with a bamboo motif was refreshing, and the solid wooden floor was refined with age.

There was something nostalgic about the rattan furniture, making this the most comfortable area in the house.

I could probably relax and use my third eye here.

Hesitating as he considered the risk of falling over if something should happen, Masamichi sat down on the nearest wicker chair.

Closing his eyes and moving his small shoulders up and down in an attempt to relax, he turned his attention to his third eye, which Shino had earlier touched to remind him that it was there.

It was difficult at first, but eventually, he was able to feel the chi in his body gather around his third eye.

He imagined the large, invisible eyelids between his eyebrows slowly opening, and his brain began to visualize things that he couldn't see.

...Are these...small shadows gathered together...? Where are they?

It was a strange sensation. It was probably more accurate to say his brain was directly perceiving, not seeing, the vision. Gradually becoming aware of the experience, Masamichi used his third eye as a type of radar and slowly expanded the area he was exploring.

Shino had been teaching him how to use his third eye, and Masamichi was gradually honing his abilities. But even Shino couldn't explain everything to him. The only way to learn what was crucial was through trial and error.

Okay, there it is... Huh? There seems to be something else...

Just as he was trying to concentrate even more, he heard a loud noise from behind, and his focus was brutally broken.

"Whoa!"

His third eye, which he had managed to open, closed instantly. Although he could see with his usual eyes again, they couldn't connect properly with his brain, and his vision flickered.

But he was worried about what had caused that noise, not to mention Shino and the others. Clutching the back of a chair, Masamichi somehow managed to get on his feet and call out to them.

“What is it?!”

Then he heard footsteps approaching and Shino’s voice right near him.

“It fell.”

“...Huh?”

“Something must have been unhappy that you were probing into it. *Something*—or *things*—dropped the showerhead from its holder into the tub in the bathroom.”

“O-oh, I see. Is everyone okay?”

“No problem. They’re fine.”

By the time he exhaled in relief, Masamichi’s vision had returned to normal, and he attempted to explain to Shino what had happened.

“I tried to investigate, and I think there’s several...more than one...being, like shadows, above.”

“Above?”

“They’re probably in the attic. I heard voices talking deliberately. But I don’t think they were speaking in words.”

“So they used to be humans, as I suspected.”

“That’s my take. They weren’t forming words, but it sounded like they were having a human conversation.”

“Hmm.”

“And also...I’m not really sure, since I didn’t feel it clearly. I was distracted by the sound of the showerhead falling, but...”

“Tell me.”

Prompted by Shino, Masamichi said without much confidence, “For just a few seconds, I picked up on a burning smell...and sensed tremendous heat.”

“Heat?”

“My cheeks got hot like they were being seared. I was shocked. Nothing like that has ever happened before. That’s about all I could feel. I don’t know if the

information will be of any use to you,” he said uncertainly, and Shino shrugged.

“Whatever, it’s better to have information than to be without it... Ah, it may be...”

Talking to himself, Shino turned on his heel and walked down the stairs, saying something to Lord Johnston and Selwyn, who’d been observing from the middle of the stairway.

Selwyn pulled a notebook out of the breast pocket of his suit and quickly wrote something in it.

Has Shino noticed something?

Masamichi wanted to be beside him and join in the conversation, but as soon as he left the sunroom, the ghostly air of the things in the attic that he had sensed earlier attacked him again.

To make matters worse, his body often felt heavy and sluggish after using his third eye, as if he was trying to move around underwater. Perhaps it was because he was temporarily drained after exhausting his chi.

Ugh, this is tough. I want to get back outside as soon as I can. But I can’t go down the stairs and push Lord Johnston out of the way, and I can’t move my body the way I want.

As Masamichi leaned against a wall in the second-floor hallway, attempting to rest his body, Shino finished his exchange with Lord Johnston and Selwyn and looked up at him.

“Hey, we’re done here. Let’s go.”

“Oh, okay!”

In situations like this, Shino wasn’t willing to wait around. Masamichi suspected that he was announcing his intention to leave promptly so he could catch the things lurking in the attic off guard. He was probably going to wait until nighttime, when their power would increase and make it easier for him to catch them.

I have to go.

Masamichi pulled his heavy body away from the wall and began descending

the stairs more carefully than when he went up.

However, at the halfway point, his legs became tangled, and he almost fell the rest of the way down.

“Whoa!”

“Watch out!”

Selwyn moved fast. He was the one who caught Masamichi, not Shino.

“Mr. Masamichi! Are you okay?”

“Oh...y-yes, thank you.”

“You look pale. You should rest in the living room for a while.”

Selwyn was about to pick up Masamichi’s small body in his arms and carry him, but Shino stopped him a little roughly.

“Don’t mind him. He’s going back to the hotel with me.”

Then he grabbed Masamichi’s arm and savagely pulled him away from Selwyn.

“Shino, that’s no way to talk to Mr. Selwyn,” Masamichi said as he endured the pain in his gripped arm.

“It’s all right. Perhaps you should rest in your hotel bed,” the secretary said with a smile.

After saying good-bye to Lord Johnston and Selwyn, who said they had another matter to attend to, Shino and Masamichi returned to their hotel in another large black cab.

Clouds were beginning to appear in the sky, which had been clear earlier.

“The weather in London sure does change at a dizzying pace,” Masamichi said as he sat next to Shino. But there was no reply. “...I’m sorry.”

Shino clicked his tongue when Masamichi apologized, who then made his small body curl up even smaller.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Well, I caused trouble for Mr. Chris when I lost my balance, and I thought

you might be mad.”

“Why would I be upset over something like that?”

Puzzled by the blunt response, Masamichi said, “You’re in a worse mood than usual right now. You’ve had that scary look on your face since I almost fell on the stairs in that house. If that isn’t the reason, then why are you in such a bad mood?”

Shino replied by clicking his tongue again.

Masamichi thought Shino might be annoyed at how frail he was when all he’d done was use his third eye a bit. But Shino chastised him when he apologized, and he clicked his tongue when he asked why he was mad, so Masamichi didn’t know what to do.

“Shino...”

“You’re my servant. Don’t overstep your bounds and ask about my mood,” he said, rebuking Masamichi as he looked out the window.

Masamichi was feeling much better now that he had left the house and was away from its ghostly atmosphere. He was still pale, though, from the anxiety of not knowing why Shino was angry.

Shino glanced at his face, seeming confused, then clicked his tongue three times and spat out, “I don’t understand it, either.”

“...Huh?”

“I said I don’t know why I feel so irritated. How could you understand something that even I don’t get? So don’t worry about it.”

Ever since they first met, Shino had been clear and decisive about everything. This was the first sign of hesitation, or perhaps uncertainty, appearing on his face and resonating in his voice.

“But, Shino...”

“Never mind. Forget it.”

With that, Shino put his hand on Masamichi’s shoulder and pulled his slender body toward him.

“Whoa!”

Masamichi found himself leaning on Shino’s strong arms and shoulders.

He stiffened in surprise, but it was Shino’s order for him to rest that made him realize his harshness wasn’t because of anger but rather embarrassment.

Oh, he isn’t angry anymore. Well, actually, he is mad, but not at me, I guess...

Somewhat relieved but still unable to understand what was going through Shino’s mind, Masamichi pressed his cheek against Shino’s shirt sleeve and thought hard.

Then what is he angry about?

Masamichi couldn’t help wondering, but he knew that Shino wouldn’t tell him anything, no matter how hard he pressed.

Regardless of how human he looked and no matter how substantial his appearance may seem, Shino’s body was a vessel that Tokifuyu had created. He did not have a body temperature.

As Masamichi happily noticed that his body heat was gradually warming Shino’s chilly arm, Shino quietly mumbled, “I asked Selwyn to check something for me. If it turns out the way I expect, you’ll be playing an important role in this.”

“Me? Will I get to help you exorcise the house?”

“Yeah. Have something to eat when we return to the hotel, then rest up until evening.”

“What about you?”

“I have something to do. I’ll rest once that’s done.”

“Oh...okay.”

Shino already seemed to have decided to return to the terraced house at night and confront the specters directly.

Masamichi wanted to know more about his role there, but he knew Shino wouldn’t give him the details beforehand.

May I meet Shino’s expectations, and may everything go well...

Praying, Masamichi continued to lean comfortably on Shino's arm and gazed out the window at the scenery flowing by...

That night, a little past eleven PM, Masamichi came down to the hotel lobby, saw Selwyn in the same suit he had worn during the day, and ran up to him.

"Mr. Chris! Good evening!"

Selwyn looked at Masamichi and gave him a small smile, not his usual bright business smile.

"Oh, Mr. Masamichi! I'm glad to see you looking much better than you did during the day. Did you rest well? What about dinner? I was going to make arrangements if you wanted to go out...but I didn't want to disturb you, and so I refrained from calling you."

Masamichi smiled shyly and nodded.

"Yes, I feel much better now. I had room service bring me a sandwich."

"Oh, good. The clubhouse sandwiches here are gorgeous."

"Absolutely!"

Selwyn smiled when Masamichi agreed, and then his expression suddenly turned serious.

"Excuse me," he said, reaching for Masamichi's neck.

Masamichi had worn a long-sleeved flannel shirt over his T-shirt, since the night was likely to be even colder than the daytime, and Selwyn touched his shirt collar.

"Mr. Chris?"

Startled, Masamichi tried to pull back, but Selwyn winked mischievously and whispered, "You should pull your collar in a little closer. I can see a sexy hickey. It may be late at night, but it's still a little shocking."

"Urk!!"

Masamichi jumped back and held the collar of his shirt with his hands.

"A...h-hickey?"

“Right here,” Selwyn said as he laughed and pointed to a spot on his own neck.

Oh, dang... Shinoooo!

Masamichi voiced a grand accusation in his mind.

Shino occasionally took a little of Masamichi’s chi from him before confronting a specter. He called it a “pick-me-up before work,” and it would look like an ordinary kiss to any observer.

It didn’t involve romantic feelings, though. The only reason Shino did this was because it was handy, but...on this night, things had been a little different.

As Masamichi was about to leave their suite after Shino ordered him to go downstairs without him, the specter had stopped him, walked up to him, put his teeth on his neck, and sucked hard.

All he said to Masamichi as he stood there speechless was that it wasn’t a bad idea to change the method for taking his chi now and then, and the specter hadn’t been smiling. Masamichi had no idea that he had even left a mark on his neck.

“N-no, it isn’t what you think! It’s, uh—”

Masamichi tried to explain, but Selwyn interrupted him.

“Oh, there he is. Mr. Tatsumi.”

“...!”

Masamichi gasped and turned around.

Shino was walking proudly across the lobby, wearing his usual dark-gray turtleneck and slacks.

Considering they were about to go on a big job, Masamichi couldn’t exactly blame Shino for stocking up on chi, so he resorted to throwing him a reproachful look.

Shino, however, paid no attention to Masamichi and asked Selwyn bluntly, “Where is Lord Johnston? Is he at the house?”

“No, sir. I thought he would go on the inspection tour again, but he returned

to his hotel room. He said he was tired and left me in charge of seeing to tonight's exploration."

Selwyn chuckled and pointed to the ceiling to indicate that his employer was settled in his room upstairs.

"He's a sneaky one," Shino said and shrugged. "He must have thought that it would be awkward if we ran into trouble at the site and he happened to be there. He's certainly underestimating me, isn't he?"

"O-oh, no, sir. I don't think...that's how he sees it at all."

Attempting a subtle denial, Selwyn flashed a fake smile.

"Anyway, Mr. Tatsumi, I've been looking into the matter you asked about. I was surprised. I'm not the only one who was; Lord Johnston was stunned as well."

Masamichi was intrigued by Selwyn's story and asked shyly, "What did you find out?"

"I found out about a fire," Selwyn answered, and Masamichi tilted his head in question.

"A fire? Has that house been on fire? I thought you said at first that it had never had problems like that."

Selwyn gave him a big nod. "Before my employer bought that house, we did extensive research into its background as to whether there had been accidents or incidents there in the past. However, I hadn't looked at the history of the neighborhood."

"The neighborhood?"

"A fire occurred close by while those terraced houses were being built. Records showed that eight people were killed. Mr. Tatsumi, what made you suggest that I look into the history of the area?" Selwyn asked curiously, and Shino angled his chin to point at Masamichi.

"This guy said he felt heat and smelled something burning when we were there this afternoon. The...souls...of those who burned to death must have been looking for a place to stay and wandered into the houses that were still under

construction.”

“Aha!”

Selwyn clapped, and it made a popping sound. Masamichi wondered if that gesture of being convinced was universal instead of being unique to Japan, then he looked at Shino.

“Are you saying the people who burned to death became ghosts and settled in that house?”

Shino nodded.

“Perhaps they couldn’t accept their deaths because it was an unexpected accident. Human beings are creatures that cling to life. That’s why they became ghosts.”

“...I can understand that. Sudden death isn’t something you can prepare for,” Masamichi said sympathetically and sighed. He should know. He had almost been killed in a hit-and-run accident himself.

Shino watched him with amusement and said matter-of-factly, “The thing, though, is that the human soul gradually deteriorates when it loses its body. The small shadows you sensed during the day were the ghosts that have lost their human form.”

“Oh...I see.”

“The human soul is stuck in the place where it died, unable to move. The house they moved to immediately after their deaths must have protected and also trapped them all these years.”

Selwyn appeared to be very impressed. Utterly moved, he said in a squeaky voice, “Then, Mr. Tatsumi, the reason why the house that Lord Johnston bought had been unoccupied for so long...”

“Out of the five terraced houses, it was probably the last house to have people move in. As the other four began being occupied by tenants, the ghosts must have taken up residence in the darkest attic of the only one that remained vacant. Because they neither wanted to nor could go elsewhere, they began scaring people who moved in with tricks, as we saw this afternoon.”

“Ah. That’s why that house alone has so often been vacant...”

“Right. And they’re also attempting to protect their lair by creating bizarre phenomena to drive away Lord Johnston, the first owner in a long time.”

“That’s not good. Mr. Tatsumi, please do something about those...er, ghosts. Spirits. Oh, and I have a message from Lord Johnston. He said that you cannot—must not—destroy or burn the houses. That goes for all five houses.”

Subtle nuances appeared to be a little challenging for Selwyn to manage in his proper Japanese, which was getting a little shaky.

Looking uninterested, Shino said, “I know,” then turned his sharp gaze on the man. “What about that item I told you to have ready in case my guess was right?”

“I have it ready. It’s in the cab waiting in front of the hotel.”

“All right. Then I’m heading to the site.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Shino turned on his heels and disappeared through the revolving doors. Masamichi and Selwyn quickly followed...

CHAPTER 5

A Little at a Time

Selwyn opened the door and got out of the cab as soon as it pulled up to their destination.

Shino and Masamichi also got out while Selwyn paid the driver through the window.

The date would be changing shortly. The neighborhood was quiet, with not a soul to be seen on the street.

Only sparse streetlights illuminated the paved road.

Standing before Shino and Masamichi were the five terraced houses.

Not only the house on the far right, owned by Lord Johnston, but the other four houses had also turned off all their lights except for the lamps on the gates.

Having finished paying the driver, Selwyn approached Shino and Masamichi and whispered, "Lord Johnston has told the residents in the four other houses that urgent night work is required and are having them stay at a hotel. So tonight, no one is here."

"Ah. That was very thoughtful of him."

Shino grinned, but Selwyn, somewhat flustered, added, "Compensation would be complicated if anyone was to get hurt. Damage to the houses isn't so bad... but that would also mar Lord Johnston's name!"

Masamichi understood that Selwyn meant to say that his boss's name would be hurt if the houses were wrecked. He didn't have the energy to say anything about it, and Shino said grumpily, "You told me that before. Let's go, Masamichi."

After dismissing Selwyn curtly, Shino turned toward the house.

“O-okay! Sorry, Mr. Chris, he doesn’t mean to offend you,” Masamichi said as he followed Shino, rapidly apologizing to Selwyn.

“Don’t worry about it, Mr. Masamichi. All right...I’ll unlock the door right away!”

Masamichi wondered if Selwyn was often treated badly by business partners in his role as an aristocrat’s secretary. He smiled to reassure Masamichi and headed briskly for the front door.

“Here we go. Give me a moment, and I’ll get the light.”

“I don’t need one. From here on out, do not do anything I don’t ask for.”

Selwyn was trying to be helpful and turn on the entrance light, but Shino stopped him and began looking around the house.

Masamichi bowed apologetically to Selwyn and stood beside Shino.

“Do you feel it?” the specter asked.

Masamichi responded with a small tremble.

“The pressure feels much stronger than it did during the day. This must be the ghostly air here, huh?”

Shino nodded.

“Weak specters can’t exert their true power if there is light. Knowing this, all these beings that live here can do is cause poltergeist phenomena, and the rest of the time, they’ve been hunkering down in the dark attic. Judging by this atmosphere, these beings no longer have any human will—though that isn’t surprising, so many years after they lost their bodies.”

“...Right. It must have been hard for them.”

Masamichi nodded and rubbed his arms over his long-sleeved shirt.

He felt pressure and clear hostility from the ceiling—no, from the second floor of the house.

“‘Ghostly air,’ you say? There’s no such thing, though it is dark and creepy,” Selwyn put in modestly but with suspicion as he stood behind Shino and Masamichi.

Shino glanced at him mockingly and said, “Do not give me an example of *insensitivity*.”

“‘Insensitivity’? The power of the ghosts won’t reach me? That means I’m strong, doesn’t it?”

Selwyn looked somewhat pleased, but the look of contempt on Shino’s face grew more pronounced.

“Just because you don’t feel it doesn’t mean you won’t be harmed. We can only deal with it because we feel it. Running when you have a bad feeling is the best thing to do.”

“Then what can I do when I don’t feel anything...?”

“Be aware that you have no crisis-management skills against specters. You’re the type who would be killed before you know it. You did say that Lord Johnston mentioned *feeling something here* at night, didn’t you?”

Carefully looking around as if on the lookout for an unseen enemy, Selwyn replied, “Yes, sir, I did. That’s why he promptly moved to the hotel. He also said that because he’s afraid of the dark, he’s been leaving all the lights on in the house.”

Shino flashed a wicked smile.

“He knew instinctively how to avoid specters. I must say that a born aristocrat can’t be underestimated. If he had slept in his bedroom with the lights off, the spirits of the dead might have threatened his life. Tell your boss that he’s been lucky.”

“H-huh...”

Even with the lights out, the streetlights were shining faintly through the windows, and Masamichi’s vision started adjusting to the darkness as he, Shino, and Selwyn continued to talk at the entrance.

He wasn’t psychic, and listening to Shino’s explanation was probably the first time he had developed a fear of things he couldn’t sense. Even in the darkness, Masamichi could see that Selwyn looked grim.

Oh, maybe Shino’s been waiting until our eyes got used to the dark.

Before Masamichi could say anything, Shino stared at the upstairs floor, or rather, the attic above it.

“Let’s go. We’ll take care of this right now.”

“Okay!”

Masamichi tried to follow Shino up the steps, but Selwyn called out to Shino with a puzzled look on his face.

“Mr. Tatsumi, wouldn’t it be better to turn on the lights? The ghosts will quiet down then, won’t they?”

Shino didn’t even turn around as he replied, “Weakened ghosts run and hide. It would be a pain in the neck to chase and catch a fleeing rat...unless it’s okay to burn down the whole house.”

“Burn it?! No, never!”

The corners of Shino’s mouth curved up a little at Selwyn’s panic.

“I know that. That’s why I’m doing it this way. They think the darkness is their domain, and they’ll attack us. They won’t realize that they’re revealing where they are. It will be easier for us to take them out, with minimal damage to the house.”

“M-minimal damage?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just think about keeping yourself safe,” Shino said as he went up one step at a time.

The moment Shino said that, a vase that must have been placed somewhere on the upper floor came flying at an extraordinary speed and grazed Shino’s cheek.

“Whoa!”

Masamichi, who was behind him, twisted his body just in time to avoid being hit, and because of that, the vase kept flying and struck Selwyn in the face.

“Aaagh!!”

“Oh, Mr. Chris! Are you okay?”

Stunned by Selwyn’s scream, Masamichi tried to turn around when Shino said

sharply, “Don’t mind him! I just told him to take care of himself, and that applies to you, too. You won’t be able to afford to worry about him.”

“Uh...okay!!” Masamichi turned toward Selwyn and said quickly, “Mr. Chris, be careful and stay where you are.”

“Okay, got it. I’ll stay right here!”

His Japanese completely forgotten, Selwyn called out in English and hung on to the railing for dear life. Masamichi left him that way and, also gripping the railing, took one firm step at a time up the stairs.

With each step, he felt pressure and pain, as if his head were being pushed down by a giant hand.

It’s no comparison to the pressure I felt during the day. Are they trying to drive us out of here to protect their hiding place, their only haven? But...

“Shino.”

“What?”

Having reached the second floor a step ahead of Masamichi, Shino was easily dodging the objects that came flying at him in the darkness one after another.

Masamichi bent down and used the railing as a shield as he crawled up the steps on all fours.

“You sent me here on a scouting mission during the day, saying your energy would scare the ghosts.”

“So?”

“I’m standing on my feet now, but these attacks are relentless, and... Whoa!”

Hearing something crash against the wooden railing and shatter into pieces, Masamichi screamed.

Then Shino put his hands on the cuffs of his shirt and rolled up both sleeves to his elbows.

“Oh!”

Masami let out a small cry of surprise.

On each of Shino's forearms were long, thin talismans made of Japanese paper.

The talismans glowed weakly like fireflies in the darkness. Written on them in black ink were Japanese characters that Masamichi couldn't read, along with strange patterns that looked like sticks and circles tied together.

"Shino...are those tags something to do with the spiritual stuff that Tokifuyu taught you?"

Shino smiled, then nodded.

"He was a strange man. Who would have thought he'd teach me, a specter, how to make charms to ward off evil?"

"Charms to ward off evil?! Don't tell me you're sealing your magical powers?"

"You got that quickly."

Catching an object that came flying at him with one hand, Shino gently placed it on the floor and saw that it was a small bronze statue. Then he shrugged.

"That's why the spirits of the dead take me for another human being who has come to their lair again, attacking me as they please."

"Y-you're tricking them... What are you going to do now?"

Shino stuck out a hand toward Selwyn.

"Oh...okay, I'm coming!"

Selwyn crawled up the stairs like an insect and held an item out to Shino in one trembling hand—something he had been carrying from the cab. As he did that, his other three limbs remained plastered to the steps.

It was a large, enamel washbasin, which Shino had apparently asked Selwyn to bring in advance.

Still crouched at the top of the stairs, Masamichi asked, "Shino? What's that?"

The specter held the washbowl to the tip of his nose.

"Go fill it with water."

"...Okay."

Masamichi knew that asking him why was useless since Shino would only scold him and tell him to hurry up. Keeping his low position, Masamichi dived into the bathroom with the washbowl in his arms.

The windowless bathroom was exceptionally dark. Had his eyes not yet been accustomed to the darkness, he wouldn't have seen anything. But despite a bit of haziness that was typical of seeing in the dark, Masamichi could make out the state of the bathroom.

"Whoa."

Lord Johnston had asked that damage inside the house be kept minimal...but that wasn't possible anymore.

Anything and everything inside had fallen to the floor or into the bathtub, with several items shattered or broken.

Even when all this is over, the cleanup is going to be a nightmare.

With that thought, Masamichi placed the washbowl in the sink and turned on the faucet.

Masamichi casually looked in the mirror while the water filled, and he almost screamed.

He didn't see a reflection of himself in the mirror. Instead, he saw the palms of many hands approaching from beyond the mirror.

"...!"

Masamichi took a step back, but the hands could not reach through the mirror and began banging against its surface.

Big hands, small hands, wrinkled ones, fleshy ones... Various hands that must *belong to someone* were striking at the mirror, making it shake and threatening to break it at any moment.

"Oh my god... Oh my god..."

His legs began to shake, and he could barely speak.

When the water filled up to around 60 percent of the bowl, Masamichi couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed the bowl with both hands and ran out of

the bathroom.

“M-Mr. Masamichi! Are you okay?!”

Selwyn was crouching in the area where Masamichi had been earlier, his voice trembling.

“I’m...not okay.”

That was all Masamichi could manage, his face blue and his feet wobbly, as he rushed next to Shino, the only place where he could feel safe.

“Hey, don’t spill the water.”

“Sh-Sh-Sh-Shino... Hands...in the mirror...”

“Don’t let something like that frighten you. This is where your job begins.”

“...Huh?”

“Take that water and stand in the middle of the sunroom.”

“What? What are you going to do?”

“You’ll see.”

“O-okay...”

The only way to escape from this fear was for Shino to succeed in *exorcising* this house. Trembling, Masamichi set out to do as he was told.

Then Shino called out to him.

“I’ll give you something for peace of mind.”

Shino pulled something out of his shirt pocket and dangled it in front of Masamichi’s nose. Masamichi stared at it, and when he saw what it was, he momentarily forgot his fear and widened his eyes.

It was a gold necklace. The one that Masamichi had untangled from the disastrous state it was in.

“Shino...”

“I put a little of my mystical power in it. It should give you some protection.”

“Oh...thanks!”

It's sort of like a rechargeable battery for mystical power.

Even in an emergency, Masamichi was lazily thinking about such nonsense as Shino carefully put the necklace around his neck.

It felt strangely chilly since Masamichi wasn't used to wearing jewelry, but this wasn't the time to worry about something like that.

"Go."

Shino gave him a push on the back, and Masamichi started tiptoeing into the sunroom.

Streetlights and the moonlight poured in through the large windows, making it a little brighter than the other rooms. Masamichi could see the grove of trees outside, and the sense of openness helped him calm down a little.

But that was short-lived. A buzzing...and a murmur that wasn't as distinct as words could be heard coming from all directions.

Are the spirits of the dead...talking with one another...?

Masamichi couldn't make out what they were saying, but what he sensed was obvious hostility and a desire to kill. Underneath his clothes, goose bumps rose on his arms, which trembled as he held the washbowl, making the surface of the water ripple.

Whoosh!

Some cards that had been propped up on a table came flying at him at tremendous speed, scraping Masamichi's cheek and inflicting a shallow scratch.

"Ow!"

Masamichi couldn't help yelping and didn't realize that Shino had arrived at the entrance. The specter admonished him in a low voice, "Don't make a sound. I'm going to flush them out from the attic. Keep your mouth closed tightly so the spirits don't fly inside you."

"...!"

"Here we go."

Masamichi wasn't sure if Shino was speaking to him or Selwyn...who had

come up behind him but was crouching with his hands clasped over his head.

In either case, Shino pulled the charms off from his arms, then put his lips to them, mumbled something, and threw them into the air.

Wow...!

Masamichi silently exclaimed in admiration.

The two talismans fluttered in the air as if they had a will of their own, then flew out of the sunroom.

Rustle...!

Masamichi felt the dead spirits in the attic rustling hastily as they encountered Shino's formidable mystical strength.

But as he was about to tell Shino that...

Whoosh!!

...a tremendous wind blew into the sunroom, and Masamichi involuntarily closed his eyes. The wind didn't die down at all, and all Masamichi could do was hang on to the washbasin and do his best to plant himself on the floor.

"What...the hell...is this...? Whoa!! Oh, dang."

He had opened his eyes a fraction to see what was going on and ended up shouting. Remembering Shino's advice, he quickly closed his mouth, but he was screaming like crazy in his mind.

Within a few seconds, the entire sunroom had burst into flames.

Driven by the fierce wind, the blaze rumbled and swirled around the spacious room.

The muddy stream of fire was a complex mix of red, orange, yellow, and gold and looked like a flaming dragon swimming in the sky.

The dragon surrounded Masamichi as he stood there, holding the washbasin.

There was no way to escape. With the inferno fast threatening to swallow him up, Masamichi gave in to be not only severely burned but also scorched to death.

But.

Huh? It isn't hot.

Masamichi was taken aback.

His vision was filled with flames, and the glare almost burned out his optic nerves, but he didn't feel the heat at all.

Why...? Oh, wait, maybe it's...

Masamichi gasped.

The sound of a lonely dragon cut through the roar of the blaze.

It's Shino playing his flute. So Shino's behind this!

The insubstantial flames were probably an illusion that Shino had created using his power.

He was reenacting the great fire where the dead spirits in the attic had lost their human lives.

As if manipulated by the sounds of the flute that resonated in a high key, then low, the flames moved into the vents in the high ceiling toward the attic.

"Aaaaagh!"

Deafening screams came from the attic. They were followed by loud noises—as if multiple objects were thrashing about and crashing all over the attic—and cries of anguish.

Surely, even Selwyn, who had no psychic abilities, could sense the commotion. Shino and Masamichi could hear his cries for help, but they couldn't leave everything behind to aid him just then.

Shino... Shino, what should I do?!

Somehow, while managing to stop himself from calling out to Shino, Masamichi focused hard and tried to look at him.

But the flames around him were too intense, and he couldn't see him.

That was when he heard Shino's voice—not through his ears, but directly in his brain. His cool voice was crystal clear, as if Shino was whispering in his ear.

"I blocked their escape route with my talismans. They're engulfed in flames and panicking, and that's the only place where they can get away from the attic."

In response, Masamichi also replied in his head, *"Do you mean...here in this sunroom?"*

"Right. The fire is made from my mystical powers and will not harm you. For those spirits of the dead, it's the same threat that once took their lives and will now burn away even the remains of their crumbling souls."

"They're going to be burned again, hundreds of years after they died? Shino... that's cruel."

Masamichi couldn't help voicing his protest, but Shino's reply was unwavering and frigid.

"It's impossible to bury them as people since their souls no longer exist in the human form. There's no other way to save them besides wiping them out of this world."

"But you don't have to burn them."

"There is a way to save them peacefully, but that's up to you."

"Up to me?"

"What's that you're holding in your hands?"

With that question, Masamichi stopped hearing Shino's voice. All that surrounded him and continued to make him dizzy were the moans of the spirits of the dead, filled with anguish and malevolence.

What am I holding...in my hands?

Maybe he wasn't affected by the inferno, but Masamichi couldn't stay unconcerned at the thought of those former human beings who were suffering overhead. Masamichi focused on settling his anxiety and slowly lowered his gaze.

Was Shino talking about the water in the water bowl? What am I supposed to do with it...?

That's when he heard Shino's voice again.

"Here it comes."

"...!"

A huge black mass, as if darkness had solidified, fell with a *thud* onto the sunroom floor, piercing through the flames, which had risen exceptionally high.

It wriggled on the floor with the violent movement of an amoeba, then spread wide, and soon, eight figures rose from it, writhing, contorting, and undulating.

A large figure, a small figure, a fat figure, a severely emaciated figure, and a figure with a bent back.

It was like an ominous play of shadows.

It was both mesmerizing and grotesque. The figures were oddly distorted, undulating and moving inhumanly.

They looked as if they were vividly reproducing the memory of how they'd been engulfed in flames when they were human beings and how they'd lost their lives, and it was excruciating to watch them suffer.

One had both hands raised as if pleading to God for help, another appeared to be searching for a parent to cling to, and yet another flailed about, rolling on the floor in agony...

The eight shadows stretched and shrank violently in a dance of death as the sound of Shino's flute echoed about.

"How can I...? Oh, I get it!"

Masamichi took an involuntary step onto the burning floor toward the shadows. He knew the phantom flame wouldn't burn him, but he still needed to muster up some courage to proceed. His legs were shaking, but Masamichi didn't hesitate to hold out the water bowl to the shadows.

I have water here...!

They couldn't possibly understand the human language, let alone Japanese. Still, Masamichi hoped that something in his inner voice would reach their once-human souls.

The area between his eyebrows around his third eye was gradually becoming hot.

Come on, understand me...! This has to be what you all wanted when you faced death. It's cold, clean water!

Masamichi desperately called out to them over and over again in his mind, hoping he could convey the message.

Then...

...suddenly, the shadows stopped moving. One by one, they flipped themselves over like fish leaping from the surface of the water, transformed into long, thin figures, and jumped into the water bowl.

Strangely enough, the surface of the water remained still, with no change in the water level. But as each form dived in, the clear water gradually became dark and murky.

Masamichi held his breath and counted in his mind: *One, two, three shadows...*

And finally, the last shadow was sucked in as if chasing after the others... Masamichi let out a gasp. The high-pitched whistle that had been resonating through the steel frame of the sunroom abruptly came to a halt. And the flames simultaneously disappeared as if nothing had ever happened.

A sudden silence fell over the room.

"Give me that."

This time, Masamichi really heard Shino's voice at close range, and he didn't have a chance to react before the washbowl was taken from him.

"Oh!"

The weight suddenly disappeared from his arms. As Masamichi gazed with a strange sense of loss, Shino didn't hesitate to bring the washbowl to his mouth. Like a samurai downing a large cup of sake, he gulped down the muddy water, where the spirits of the dead had dissolved.

Masamichi watched him dumbfoundedly. It was when he saw Shino's beautiful face contort as he pulled his face away from the washbowl that

Masamichi desperately shouted, “Shino! That...water... You drank the whole thing!! Are you okay?”

“There’s no other way. With a bowl filled with water, you comforted the spirits of the dead who were being chased by flames. But that comfort is only temporary. The sole way to give them eternal sleep...salvation...is for me to eat them before they awaken again from their peaceful rest.”

“But, Shino, are you okay? Won’t you get a stomachache or something?”

“Of course not. Don’t underestimate your master, servant,” he said in his usual cool manner, wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, and looked around the sunroom.

“It’s a bit of a mess here, and a lot of things have been broken, but I suppose it’s tolerable enough. With the bizarre phenomenon gone, the gains should be greater for the client. So...let’s go.”

Tossing the now-empty washbowl onto the floor, Shino walked out of the sunroom.

Masamichi heard Shino’s voice behind the door.

“Hey, observer. Just how long are you going to keep puking? Get your act together and call a cab!”

Masamichi could also hear Selwyn vomiting, so he dashed out of the sunroom to join him and Shino...



The next morning, a little past nine o’clock.

Masamichi was in the lobby of their hotel.

He was sitting snugly in a chair in the corner, but with the checkout rush around him, he felt rather out of place.

An hour ago, as soon as they finished breakfast, Shino said that he would spend the day resting and ordered Masamichi not to disturb him until the evening.

Although Shino never allowed others to see his weaknesses, exorcising that

house the previous night must have been taxing, even for him.

“Had I been in my previous form, it would have been a piece of cake, and I could have handled it with a single finger. But because of Tokifuyu, I’m left to cope with human constraints, even a thousand years after he put a curse on me.”

Despite appearing calm, he’d been complaining like that when they returned to the hotel. Perhaps it wasn’t as easy as he said it was to *digest* the dead spirits he’d taken into his body.

After devouring a full breakfast, Shino returned to his room, stripped off his clothes, and slipped into bed again.

Having no other choice, Masamichi had gathered up the clothes Shino had scattered on the floor and folded them neatly, then left the room with nothing else to do.

Although Masamichi was still mentally exhausted, the previous day’s event hadn’t been much of a physical burden on him. If someone was to ask him how he was, he’d say physically, he was fine, but he wasn’t in the mood to go out sightseeing by himself.

I did some research on museums and art galleries that Shino might like, in case we had time to visit after our job was done...but it would be a little lonely going without him.

Masamichi glanced at the guidebook in his shoulder bag and sighed.

What should I do? With all these people coming and going, this place is uncomfortable, and besides...

He didn’t like that the hotel staff kept glancing at him. Even in Japan, Masamichi looked young for his age, so maybe the staff saw him as a child sitting alone in the lobby.

Just as he stood up to go outside, someone called his name.

Selwyn, dressed in a polo shirt and slacks—casual attire he hadn’t seen him in before—smiled and waved as he walked toward him.

“Mr. Chris! Are you feeling okay today? Physically, and, uh...mentally?”

Selwyn scratched his head, looking embarrassed.

“I’m ashamed of the way I behaved in front of you and Mr. Tatsumi last night. I reported to Lord Johnston first thing this morning, and he gave me a special day off. I couldn’t stop wondering how you and Mr. Tatsumi were doing, so I came here and... Where is Mr. Tatsumi?”

“He’s sleeping. He does seem tired, and he told me not to come back until the evening so he could rest.”

“Surely, you must be tired, too.”

Masamichi shook his head.

“All I did was stand there holding a water bowl. Mr. Chris, you have to be tired after all the scary experiences you had.”

“It was certainly scary! What a spooky house. I don’t ever want to go back again,” he said with a comical smile and made an exaggerated gesture of horror. “But after returning home last night, I slept hard as if I had fainted, and I’m feeling much better this morning.”

Selwyn was a business partner, but he was off the clock, so it was no wonder that he was acting much more casual and carefree.

“Great!”

Selwyn’s bright, friendly attitude was contagious, and Masamichi smiled back at him.

“So, Mr. Masamichi, where are you off to? I’ll go with you—accompany you as a friend.”

Surprised, Masamichi waved a hand.

“You don’t have to do that. I can’t ask you to be with me on your day off.”

“It’s okay. I’m used to showing people around London. It would be my pleasure.”

Selwyn was so enthusiastic that Masamichi reluctantly said, “Are you sure? Then, uh...I want to visit the British Museum.”

“Great choice! Is there anywhere else you’d like to go?”

“The National Gallery...or the Natural History Museum.”

“Okay! Then we have no time to lose. Let’s get going!”

With that, Selwyn took Masamichi’s hand in his and cheerfully led the way.

Masamichi was taken aback; he couldn’t recall anyone ever doing something like that with him. Still, he figured that it wasn’t significant, since people greeted each other with a handshake in the Western world.

Thus, Masamichi went out with Selwyn to the places he had planned to visit with Shino.

True to his word that he was used to showing people around, Selwyn was great at selecting the exhibits at the British Museum that would interest Masamichi and made sure that he was satisfied, even after a brief visit.

Lunch was at a restaurant attached to the museum, and they took a break at a quaint café in the basement of a church. In the evening, Selwyn obtained tickets to see a musical that was also popular in Japan, and they went to a Chinese restaurant in Soho for a light dinner. After a day full of various activities, it was past eleven PM when they finished everything.

Sipping hot jasmine tea after dinner, Masamichi, looking a little tired but very satisfied, bowed to Selwyn.

“I’m grateful to you for spending the day with me and staying out so late. Thanks to you, I really enjoyed myself, and the day seemed to fly by.”

Selwyn also looked a little tired and massaged his shoulders.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve had so much fun. It was a full sightseeing course. I don’t think I’ve ever hustled like this for fun with my partner.”

“Me neither. Actually, I’ve never been on a date. So, Mr. Chris, you have a partner, huh?”

Selwyn waved a hand in the air.

“No, no. Not anymore. I was dumped about two years ago. I have a hardworking boss and am always working on holidays and doing overtime. I don’t know how many times I’ve canceled a date at the last moment.”

“Did that upset your girlfriend?” Masamichi asked hesitantly, and Selwyn nodded, then shook his head.

“Yes, it upset my partner—but my partner wasn’t a girl. I was in a relationship with a man,” he whispered with a wink. Masamichi didn’t understand the meaning of the gesture but quickly apologized.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“No problem. You’re in a relationship yourself...aren’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Mr. Tatsumi is your boss, and he’s also...your lover, isn’t he? That,” he said with a mischievous grin and pointed to Masamichi’s neck. “He’s the only one who could have given you that hickey.”

“Oh!”

Masamichi blushed and put his hand against the neck of his hoodie. Selwyn was referring to the hickey on his neck that he’d spotted the day before.

Flustered, Masamichi desperately denied it.

“No, um...I mean, it’s true that Shino gave it to me, but it isn’t what you think. It was just...on a whim, like eating a meal.”

“Hmm?”

“What I’m trying to say is that Shino and I aren’t in a relationship.”

“You aren’t? And yet he kissed you on the neck?”

“Well, that’s, uh...”

Masamichi was at a loss for an answer and just lowered his head.

With a knowing look on his face, Selwyn said, “I see,” and nodded with a beautiful smile. “You’re very interesting—unpredictable—and very lovely.”

“Huh?!”

Selwyn took his hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world and looked into his eyes.

“By the way, is it all right for you to go back to Mr. Tatsumi now?”

Masamichi was concerned about Selwyn holding his hand, but pulling it back didn't seem nice. Not wanting to be rude, he ended up letting the man do as he pleased. Selwyn had made body contact like that several times during the day, and Masamichi had been telling himself that this was probably how British people were with one another.

"Probably."

Selwyn let go of Masamichi's hand, giving it a light pat as if regretting the loss of contact.

"Then I'll take you back to the hotel, but first, why don't we stop by my flat?"

"Oh?! Your flat?"

Selwyn smiled pleasantly.

"You may have already seen a five-star hotel and Lord Johnston's terraced house, but you don't know the type of house a regular guy like me lives in, do you? How about taking a look at an average home and having a cup of coffee to finish off your day of discoveries?"

Masamichi had rarely been invited to someone's home. As such, he was seriously hesitant, but Selwyn's suggestion sounded legitimate, and he was also curious.

He thought it would probably be rude not to accept Selwyn's kind offer after he had spent a day taking him sightseeing.

As I recall, he said he shared a flat with other people... I wouldn't be barging in on him when he's alone, so it shouldn't hurt to drop by for a bit.

Masamichi convinced himself and said, "Sure."

Selwyn's eyes instantly lit up like a blue summer sky, and he said, "Okay, let's go," then somewhat excitedly raised his hand to ask for the bill...

As soon as they got out of their cab, Selwyn put his arm around Masamichi's shoulder.

I didn't drink, but Mr. Chris had some beer. That must be why we seem a little cozy. This is the kind of thing that high school kids do, right?

Selwyn had been chatting with him throughout their fifteen-minute cab ride.

He was a good talker, and he made Masamichi laugh a lot, telling him lots of stories. Like when he'd had to look all over London for Christmas ornaments in June on Lord Johnston's whim; and how he had his first lover at the age of fifteen when he closed his eyes too soon when they kissed and ended up sucking on his lips.

They had gotten to know each other well over the day, and Masamichi interpreted the slightly intoxicated man putting his arm around his shoulders as a sign of friendship. He'd never had a best friend to share skinship with, and he felt both a little shy and a little happy.

The day has been full of firsts for me, and now it'll be my first time seeing Mr. Chris's house.

Walking through the dark street, shoulder to shoulder with Selwyn, Masamichi arrived at a row house—type of residence along the street.

True, compared with Lord Johnston's terraced house, the flats were modest, with dull walls and front porches without ornate decorations, but they still had large bay windows facing the street, and the potted flowers displayed looked beautiful.

"This is it. Welcome to my home sweet home."

Selwyn unlocked the door and invited Masamichi inside.

"Oh yes, I forgot to mention that no one else is here today. My flatmates are away on a trip."

Selwyn then locked the front door, and the house was dark and silent.

Masamichi stood there, wishing Selwyn would hurry up and turn on the lights, when the man suddenly hugged him.

"Huh?!"

Masamichi was pushed against the wall and could barely move.

"Um, Mr. Chris, what's the matter...?"

"You came here to my house. That's your answer, isn't it?"

Selwyn held him tightly with his powerful arms, whispered in his ear, and kissed him firmly on the cheek.

The warm, moist touch of his lips made shivers run up Masamichi's spine.

"What the—?"

Selwyn was already caressing Masamichi's back with his large hands, trying to entice him.

"I thought you were Mr. Tatsumi's sweetheart, and I was thrilled to hear you say you weren't. Yet I saw you with that hickey, you little devil."

Apparently, Selwyn seemed to have mistaken Masamichi for a no-strings-attached sort of guy and was under the impression that he had come to his house for a little fun in bed.

Masamichi realized that and desperately tried to explain.

"Oh, um, that's a misunderstanding, and...I'm not like that. Uh, please stop this. Please move away from me."

He wanted to push Selwyn as hard as he could, but it must have been the shock of the turn of events—he was surprisingly weak. The result was that he had his hands resting on Selwyn's arms, which made the misunderstanding even worse.

"Ah, the Japanese style of hard-to-get. Two can play that game."

"No...that's not it..."

Masamichi was so upset that he was tongue-tied, and his whole body was trembling, unable to put up a fight. Selwyn held him passionately and began caressing him all over.

"Don't worry—this isn't a spooky house, so we don't have any ghosts here. The bed is nice, but it's pretty exciting to do it in a spot like this, isn't it?"

"...That's not what I meant..."

"Heh-heh, what a sweetie, clinging to me like that when you sound so negative."

"Don't!"

He was almost kissed on the lips, barely managing to dodge it by shaking his head, but Selwyn's lips went to his neck instead.

Tears fell from Masamichi's eyes in disgust and fear.

"Oh? I didn't think you were the type to wear jewelry, but you have a necklace hidden under your shirt. Sexy."

Selwyn had put his hand under Masamichi's hoodie collar, noticed the gold necklace, and tugged it lightly.

It was the necklace that Shino had given him.

"Don't...touch that...!!"

Masamichi forced his limp body to do something. He somehow managed to twist his upper body to escape, tearing the delicate chain he was wearing in the process and sending it plummeting to the floor.

Selwyn was used to doing this sort of thing, and he expertly lifted the hem of Masamichi's hoodie and touched his bare waist.

"Oh...!"

A sound of despair escaped Masamichi's lips.

No! Shino, help me...!

Shino...!

Feebly, like a helpless insect, Masamichi called his name.

At that moment, the locked front door was kicked down with an outrageous sound.

"...!"

Selwyn froze as he held Masamichi in his arms.

Standing there with the glow of the streetlights behind him was none other than Shino Tatsumi.

You have got...to be kidding...

Masamichi had desperately wished for the man's help, but he never imagined that Shino would really come running to a place like this.

But it was definitely him...and Shino Tatsumi was furious, like he was on fire.

Without a word, he grabbed Masamichi by the collar and yanked him roughly away from Selwyn. Masamichi yelped as he was flung down, his shoulder and back hitting the floor with a *thud*.

Oblivious, Shino grabbed Selwyn, whose mouth was gaping like a goldfish's.

Masamichi heard another dull *thud* as Shino delivered a straight right into Selwyn's cheek.

"You have some nerve, messing with something that belongs to me. Prepare to pay for it."

His voice was calm, but Masamichi noticed an angry mystical energy rising from all over Shino's body.

No, Shino, you can't attack a human being...and you can't hurt him. Doing so would be against Tokifuyu's order.

Masamichi grabbed Shino from behind, desperately trying to stop him. But he was shaken off right away and fell to the floor again.

Meanwhile, Shino had easily caught Selwyn as he tried to escape and struck him two or three times, and Selwyn's weak screams echoed in Masamichi's ears and heart.

What should I do? I can't stop Shino. What if he...kills Mr. Chris? It's all my fault.

Breathing became difficult. Masamichi couldn't tell if he should inhale or exhale, and the images of Shino and Selwyn disappeared into the darkness as if they were being blotted away.

What...should I...do...?

Masamichi's consciousness was uncontrollably disarrayed, and that was when everything went dark.

"...Huh?"

Masamichi opened his eyes and saw that a bright light was shining through lace curtains hung by a large window.

Where...am I?

Masamichi's consciousness slowly began to rewind and replay as he realized that he was wearing his pajamas and on a bed in his hotel room.

Oh, yeah. I was in Mr. Chris's flat, and...right, something happened. I called out to Shino to help me, and for some reason, he really showed up, tearing down the door.

He recalled struggling to stop Shino from grabbing Selwyn and doing his best to stop him when his breathing became labored, he felt faint, and then helplessly collapsed.

Masamichi gasped and said Shino's name.

"What is it?"

"Whoa!"

Masamichi didn't expect Shino to be so close by or to respond so quickly. He felt dizzy, but not so dizzy that he would collapse again.

Propping himself up with one hand on the sheet, Masamichi looked up at Shino, who had plopped down on a chair he had brought to the young man's bedside.

Noticing the anger that filled the man's face, Masamichi half-reflexively uttered an apology.

".....I'm sorry! I..."

"Why are you apologizing?" Shino asked in a stifled, angry voice.

"You're...you're really mad at me."

"What kind of master wouldn't be angry with a servant who can't even come home after spending just one day by himself?"

Shino was right, of course, and Masamichi hung his head.

"I...I'm sorry. I was wondering what I'd do when Mr. Chris came to check on me and offered to show me around...and—"

"You went along with him. And look what happened. What a joke. Then you collapsed without even an apology and slept for half a day."

Although he didn't raise his voice, Shino's words pierced Masamichi's heart like a sharp blade. Masamichi felt his chest tightening but still tried to clarify.

"I don't know how to explain it to you, but we were really just sightseeing until the very end. Uh, Shino, how's Mr. Chris doing...?"

"Don't worry. I only punched him three times. You passed out so spectacularly that it changed the situation."

"What do you mean?"

"He insisted that we needed to get you to a doctor first. So I carried you back here, and then he brought a Japanese doctor with him. You don't have to worry. You collapsed because you were hyperventilating."

"Hyperventilating... Right, I couldn't breathe properly. I panicked...after what happened. But anyway, what about Mr. Chris? What happened to him after that?"

Shino sniffed as if the subject bored him.

"Despite his demeanor, he has spirit. Even with his bloodied face, he explained to me that everything was his misunderstanding and you weren't the least to blame. It appears that he went to report his misbehavior to his employer after that."

"He went to see Lord Johnston?"

Still grim-faced, Shino nodded.

"Yeah. A while after the doctor left, Johnston came and apologized profusely. He said he would severely punish an unscrupulous secretary like that, which means I don't have to go to the trouble of doing anything further."

Masamichi nodded with mixed feelings.

"I...see."

He'd panicked when Selwyn suddenly started coming on to him. But thinking back, perhaps Selwyn had been testing the waters when he held Masamichi's hand, invited Masamichi to his home, and put his arm around him. Maybe, in his way, he was gauging whether Masamichi would accept him.

Now that Masamichi could think calmly, he thought he may also have been partly to blame; he'd taken for granted that Selwyn's actions were how British people dealt with one another.

"I'm sorry. I was careless."

Still, with a grumpy look on his face, Shino said, "Precisely. Of course, Selwyn deserves to die for trying to touch something that belongs to me, but you were acting like an idiot. From now on, don't be so gullible with strangers."

Masamichi bowed deeply and apologized.

"...I'll be careful. I'm truly sorry."

Shino's face remained scary as he mumbled, "I'll forgive you once, but there won't be a second time."

Masamichi nodded. Then sensing that Shino's mood had somewhat improved, he asked softly, "How did you know where I was?"

Shino picked up the gold chain on the bedside table with his fingertips.

"This."

"Oh...the necklace. Sorry, I'd been wearing it since you gave it to me, but it broke. You said the day before yesterday that it had your mystical power."

Shino nodded and played with the chain in his hand.

"As long as it contains my power, I can follow it whenever I want. I can immediately tell where you are."

"...Wow. It's like a specter's version of GPS tracking."

Shino glared at Masamichi and said brusquely, "I assumed you'd be going around the standard tourist sights, but you suddenly started heading in a direction where there was nothing. I thought it odd and got into a cab."

"Oh...I see. Um, Shino..."

"Now what?"

"Thanks for coming to my rescue. I was so shocked and scared. I couldn't move like I wanted, and it was like my body didn't belong to me. I wanted to scream for help, but I could barely form words. But—"

“You called me.”

“...!”

“Don’t underestimate a specter’s hearing. I could hear you calling out to me for help, however faintly. So I believe your excuse that you didn’t try to give yourself to him willingly.”

Shino looked Masamichi straight in the eye.

Masamichi’s eyes widened, and tears of relief—different from the tears he’d shed the previous night—welled up.

“I wonder...,” Masamichi muttered as he wiped his eyes with his pajama sleeve.

“...About what?”

“You sometimes, um, sort of...kiss me...to suck my chi when you’re working with those artifact spirits, right?”

“So?”

“That’s exactly it. You stun me because you always do it when I least expect it, but that’s all. I noticed that when Mr. Chris kissed me last night. I hated it so much that I had goose bumps all over my body. It was disgusting, and I feel bad about saying this, but I figured that was what it meant to be horrified.”

Shino listened to Masamichi without a word, and Masamichi told him what he honestly felt.

“Of course, it may have to do with my belief that for you, kissing me is like having a meal. But I’ve never been grossed out when you kissed me.”

“...Oh?”

Shino grinned and got to his feet. He pressed his fingers against Masamichi’s forehead and made him lie on the bed again, then slowly bent down and kissed his lips.

Shino’s lips were as cold as ice. They slowly captured Masamichi’s lips as if he was tasting them, and then he pulled away slightly.

Both of them had their eyes open, and their gazes intertwined at close range.

“No...it doesn't make me uncomfortable,” Masamichi said in a whisper as if affirming his feelings.

“It's delicious chi,” Shino said, appearing somewhat irritated. “It's such tasty chi that...it makes me want to eat you.”

Masamichi swallowed upon hearing Shino's hot and desperate desire...then whispered with a sigh, “Okay. You can eat me.”

Shino hadn't expected an affirmative response. His face turned aghast, and he moved farther away.

“...What did you just say?”

But Masamichi continued to speak calmly. “I don't know why I said that. I don't want to be in pain. But it's tougher for me to think that you're starving because of me.”

“Masamichi...”

“I really feel...that you can eat a finger or even an arm if that's what it takes to make you full. But life would be pretty convenient if you don't fix it up, and you'd use up the same amount of chi you gained from eating me to do that, right?”

Shino repositioned himself in his chair and shrugged.

“Perhaps more.”

“Then it wouldn't make much sense. Sorry.”

“Then let me have intercourse with you.”

Masamichi firmly denied Shino's second request.

“You can't do that.”

Shino frowned disapprovingly and folded his arms.

“I don't get it. It's better than having your arm ripped off. All you'd do is have your body penetrated for a short time. You'd still be in one piece, wouldn't you?”

“I think I said this before, but that's not it... I like you and care about you a lot more than when we first met. But things like that... At least for me, it's

something I want to do with the one and only person in the world who I think is for me.”

“I’m your one and only master in the world. You’re being very arrogant if that isn’t enough.”

Seeing how earnest Shino was being, Masamichi burst out laughing.

“Geez...that’s not what I mean.”

“What’s so funny?”

“You’re much older than me, and you’re really mature, but sometimes, you talk like a spoiled brat.”

Masamichi stopped laughing and looked at Shino’s face as he continued to rest his head on the pillow.

“I want a little more time. You might get mad at me again for saying this, but I think I’m gradually starting to fall in love with you.”

“Hey. What kind of way is that to speak with your master?”

Sensing that Shino’s mood was turning sour again, Masamichi quickly continued talking.

“I know! I’m well aware that I don’t have the right to say no to you. But... maybe you’ll get mad at me, but you’re always patient with me, and I...”

“You what?”

“Sorry, I’m not sure what I want to say. I have too little experience in relationships. But just now, for the first time in my life, I feel that I’m starting to be attracted to you. Oh boy, I’ve never said anything like this to anyone before, and I’m so embarrassed, I could die.”

Shino placed his hands on Masamichi’s hot cheeks and said arrogantly, “Don’t die over something like that. And if you’re saying you’ll let me penetrate you if you fall in love with me, then hurry up and do that.”

“...Whoa. That may be a hell of a line.”

“Shut up. Stop talking and go to sleep.”

Annoyed, Shino unfolded his arms and covered Masamichi’s eyes with his

large palms.

“...Shino.”

“This isn’t the time to dillydally over trivial matters. Sleep, eat, and recover quickly.”

“But, Shino...!”

Masamichi’s complaints were never vocalized in words.

His view was still being blocked by Shino’s hands when the specter pressed his lips against Masamichi’s again.

“Listen. Don’t you ever let anyone else touch you.”

Their lips were still in contact when Masamichi nodded silently to the words that Shino whispered in his low voice.

And feeling the cool touch of Shino’s hands against his eyes, Masamichi fell into a warm, peaceful sleep.

Two days later, a little after six PM, Masamichi and Shino were in the departure lobby at Heathrow Airport.

Shino had decided to return to Japan after Masamichi recovered.

So much has happened during our trip..., Masamichi thought absently as he looked out the window at the plane they were about to board.

No hard feelings remained concerning Selwyn. He had been waiting for Shino and Masamichi in the lobby when they went downstairs to check out.

Although Shino had a sour look on his face and hadn’t said a word, Selwyn had come with his boss, Lord Johnston, and sincerely apologized to Masamichi with a still-swollen face. It also gave Masamichi a chance to apologize for causing the misunderstanding.

He’s a good person. Shino might get angry, but I hope we can meet again sometime...without that sort of thing.

Shino looked away from the paperback he had been reading and said bluntly, as if reading Masamichi’s mind, “What are you grinning about? Are you that happy you got to see that secretary again?”

“It isn’t like that! I feel good that I got to see and talk to him and make things right.”

“...Hmph.”

As Masamichi watched Shino turn away, his whole face expressing his disinterest, the word that came to Masamichi’s mind for the first time was *cute*.

What is it with him? He’s a whole lot older than me, knows much more than I do, and has been through a hell of a lot...yet he sometimes acts like a spoiled little kid.

During this trip to London, Masamichi had seen different aspects of Shino that he had never seen before.

Their relationship had also unexpectedly deepened.

Masamichi didn’t yet know how it would change their relationship in the future.

But...

I want to know more about Shino. That desire has become stronger during this trip. And—

He called out to Shino, ready to be completely honest with him.

“Shino. I’m not good at talking, but I’d like to tell you more about myself. I want you to listen to what I have to say.”

Shino frowned in annoyance at Masamichi’s sudden statement.

“Why?”

“I want to know more about you, and I want you to know more about me.”

“And I’m asking you why...”

“The more we understand each other, the better our master-servant relationship will be, right?”

Shino considered that for a few seconds, then said, “Do as you like,” and went back to his reading.

Besides...I’ll probably love him more, and I’d like him to like me more, even if

only a little.

Cherishing the delicate emotions he felt for Shino but couldn't admit to just yet, Masamichi placed his hand on the neckline of his jacket. Then he gently touched the amulet necklace, which Shino had repaired for him.

EPILOGUE

“Boy, it’s hot... The heat in Japan is really tough to bear after experiencing the cooler summer in England.”

As soon as Masamichi stepped out of the prep school building, a damp wave of heat enveloped his body like jelly.

Even his hair felt like it was on fire in the strong sun, and he quickly pulled a hat out of his bag and put it on.

Parasols for men had been growing in popularity recently, but he tended to avoid them, not out of embarrassment but because he could imagine how inconvenient it would be to have one hand constantly holding a parasol.

I wouldn’t mind using a parasol that could be attached to your head...but no, I guess I wouldn’t have the guts to stroll around wearing it.

Pondering silly things like that, Masamichi began walking down the main street by the train station and headed for Bougyoudou.

He was amazed by his simplicity, but his steps were light despite the heat because he had gotten a perfect score on his English quiz.

Masamichi hadn’t had a choice, but he’d been feeling a little guilty for using up part of his summer vacation—the most important time for studying for his college entrance exams—on a trip to England, and his test results made him feel slightly less guilty.

I wonder if my English test scores improved a bit because I’d gone to an English-speaking country.

With that thought in mind, Masamichi went down the busy street, searching for shaded areas.

Through the glass windows of a café, he could see people eating sweets that

looked delicious.

They looked cool and tasty. The parfaits particularly grabbed his attention.

Holding back the urge to wander into the shop, Masamichi eventually stopped in front of a small bakery.

“Hello and welcome,” a friendly voice greeted him when he opened the glass door and stepped inside.

Behind the classic glass case was an older woman. In the kitchen at the back of the store, her husband, the owner and pastry chef, was making something.

“Hi,” Masamichi said to the woman with a brief bow.

He had heard that this shop had been a favorite of Bougyoudou’s previous owner and his wife.

Shino seemed to like their old-fashioned approach of using quality ingredients to make simple, traditional cakes and baked goods. Several other bakeries were in the area, but Shino apparently considered this shop the place to go for sweets.

The storekeeper remembered Masamichi, who had visited several times with Shino.

“Oh? Isn’t Mr. Tatsumi with you today?” she asked with a smile.

“Oh, no, it’s just me.”

Masamichi looked inside the glass case with a shy smile on his face, feeling like a child on his first solo errand.

There were chocolate-covered cupcakes with a humorous tanuki design, yellow Mont Blanc chestnut cakes topped with candied chestnuts, lemon pies with a delicious-looking meringue that appeared crispy on the top, baked Jonathan apples, and shortcakes with a canned-yellow-peach filling in the center.

Everything looked yummy, and he couldn’t stop staring at them all.

“Which would you like today? The usual buttercream cake?”

Masamichi looked a little nervous as he said to the smiling woman, “Um,

actually, I was wondering if you could help me with something...”

“I’m home.”

When Masamichi came home, he found Shino doing paperwork at the desk where the cash register was located.

Shino was in the darkest corner of the dimly lit store...not that it was intentional...so you would never know he was there unless you knew where to look.

“Hey, Shino? I hate being a pest, but let’s keep the lights on in the store during the day. We have customers visiting for the first time. You know we’ve been getting more new customers since we received an order for that lucky item, right? It would be a shame if they got scared at the entrance and left after coming all the way here.”

Shino tossed the pen he’d been holding onto the desk and stared at Masamichi with an expression of annoyance.

“Hey. You get back, and the first thing you do is look down on your master and lecture him. You’ve become pretty important, haven’t you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that. It’s only because you’re sitting in a chair.”

Masamichi apologized, but he couldn’t have done it any other way. He touched a switch on the wall, turned on a weak light inside the store, and then approached the long desk where Shino was sitting.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

“No.”

Well, that was point-blank. But Masamichi no longer worried about Shino’s curt responses and lifted the small paper box he was carrying.

“If that isn’t a rush job that you’re doing, how about stopping for a tea break? It’s almost time for a snack anyway.”

“Is it already that late? I’m nearly finished here.”

“Okay. I’m going to take a shower, so how about in twenty minutes or so?”

“No problem.”

With Shino’s approval, Masamichi went up to the tea room, left the paper box on the table, and headed upstairs to his room.

After washing off his sweat and changing into his loungewear, he returned downstairs and found Shino still at work.

I wonder if he’ll finish in another five minutes. Oh well, I’ll get the tea ready and see how things go.

Masamichi prepared the tea as quietly as possible so he wouldn’t disturb Shino.

He filled a kettle with water, put it on the stove, and brought two teacups that he and Shino rarely used from the back of the cupboard.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t find a Western-style teapot, so he decided to use the glass teapot he usually used to brew Japanese tea.

Shino liked to drink Japanese tea during both tea breaks and mealtimes.

After dinner, he preferred *Kyo-bancha* tea, which the previous owner and his wife had introduced to him. Other times, he was fine with regular green tea, roasted *hojicha*, or brown rice tea.

However, Masamichi decided that they would have black English tea with their snack.

He had searched the internet the previous night and studied how to brew tea.

Most restaurants in London actually tossed tea bags in pots, and they tasted perfectly fine, so he had come home not knowing how to brew tea using leaves.

He scooped a spoonful of tea leaves he’d bought in England into the teapot he had heated, a little unsure about the proper quantity, then poured in boiled water.

The authentic way seemed to be to cover and warm the pot with a tea cozy, but since he didn’t have one, Masamichi settled for using his knit cap.

Hmmm. The package says ENGLISH BREAKFAST TEA. Could it specifically be for breakfast? No, that can’t be.

Masamichi regretted not looking at it carefully since he'd been in a hurry when he bought it at Heathrow on the day of his return.

Well, if it's good for breakfast, it must also be good for a snack!

Telling himself that, Masamichi was arranging the teacups, matching cake plates, and forks on the table when Shino quietly came up to the tea room.

It was exactly twenty minutes from the time that Masamichi said they'd have tea.

"Oh, Shino. I'm just brewing the tea."

Masamichi poured the steaming tea into cups, added plenty of milk as an accompaniment, and took them to the table.

Sitting cross-legged, Shino looked at the teacup placed in front of him and raised his eyebrows a fraction.

"A wannabe Brit, are you?"

"I thought you'd say that, but we didn't have time to do afternoon tea while we were in London, right? So...I wanted to have teatime with you in the English way, even if it was after we came home," Masamichi explained shyly as he opened the paper box.

"I stopped by that bakery we usually go to and asked if they had any English cakes. Then the shopkeeper's wife gave me this."

Masamichi carefully placed on each plate a slice of what was called a pound cake, golden on the inside and golden brown on the outside.

"She gave you *this*? It looks like an everyday slice of cake to me."

Masamichi agreed with a slightly concerned smile.

"I know. I was rude to her, saying it was just an ordinary cake. She told me it's called a Madeira cake."

Despite how erudite Shino was, it seemed to be the first time he was hearing the name. His shapely eyebrows rose by a fraction of an inch, which was a sign for Masamichi to continue.

"She said it's a standard cake in English tearooms. It's like a pound cake, but

it's the shop's original, and she said they put lemon peel in it for a little flavor."

"Huh."

"It would have been best if we had scones, but the bakery doesn't usually have them. They make them to order, so next time...I'll ask for them when the weather gets a little cool. Then we'll be able to have authentic afternoon tea. Oh, I heard it's called 'cream tea' when you serve scones with tea."

"Hmm. Is there a name for what we're having today?"

"Oh...probably not."

"So it's just tea and cake."

"Heh-heh, right. Okay, let's start eating."

"....."

As usual, Shino said nothing as he added milk and sugar to his tea and took a sip. Masamichi was a little nervous as he waited for his reaction.

"Are these the tea leaves you bought in London?" Shino asked.

"Y-yeah."

"The taste of tea changes when you use a different type of water. It tastes lighter than the tea I drank in England."

"Is it too weak?"

"I didn't say it was weak. I said it tasted lighter."

Unable to immediately understand Shino's assessment, Masamichi rushed to add milk and sugar to his tea and drank it.

"Oh, you're right. It *is* light."

Although Masamichi had brewed the tea rather strongly, it tasted light and delicate and went down easily, as Shino had said. This was probably because it wasn't very bitter.

"It must be because we have soft water in Japan. They have hard water in England, don't they?"

"I imagine so," Shino said. "But this isn't bad."

When Shino said something “wasn’t bad,” it meant he liked it.

He then took a bit of the cake and said, “This isn’t bad, either.”

Finally, Masamichi was at ease, trying the cake himself.

The sponge contained finely chopped lemon peel, was fragrant, and had a fine texture, and the tart lemon-juice icing matched it nicely. The texture was a little dry, so it was bound to be the perfect accompaniment to tea.

Masamichi glanced at the table and smiled, feeling happy that he could finally enjoy tea at Bougyoudou, which he hadn’t been able to do in London because he hadn’t been feeling well.

“It’s an interesting blend of Japanese and Western styles when we put teacups and cake plates on this wooden tray,” he commented.

Then Shino touched the tray with feeling and said, “Tokifuyu used something very similar a thousand years ago.”

“Really? They had these wooden trays that long ago, even in the Heian period?”

Shino raised the corners of his mouth barely a centimeter and nodded.

“Yeah. They were used in the same way.”

“Wow! Then Tokifuyu put plates of food on it like we’re doing...?”

“He used them to serve sweetfish, dried fruits, and Chinese sweets in unglazed bowls, along with a cup of sake. He wasn’t a big eater, but he loved sweets, good food, and sake. He often made me accompany him to what would now be called evening drinks. He would say he wanted to admire the moon and the neglected garden of his shabby home.”

Masamichi smiled. He could imagine the scene.

“Hey, did you decide to use this wooden tray because—?”

“Perhaps it was somewhat similar...to the one Tokifuyu used.”

“I see.”

Shino raised his eyebrows, looking irritated when Masamichi’s smile deepened.

“What’s so funny? Are you mocking your master?”

“No, I’m not. We humans smile when we think something is nice or wonderful.”

When Shino heard Masamichi say that, a somewhat stunned look appeared on his face.

Masamichi took a good look at Shino, worried since he’d been expecting the specter to reprimand him.

“Shino? Is something wrong?”

“No...it just occurred to me that when the color of a human’s chi is similar to another’s, perhaps that is reflected in their form as an individual.”

“Huh?!”

“Your features are completely unlike Tokifuyu’s, yet you sometimes look very much like him. The way you’re smiling now is one example.”

Stopping there, Shino muttered something in a low voice.

“My mind feels agitated, even though I, a specter, should not have sensibilities or the ability to feel.”

It was in a voice quieter than the flapping of insect wings, but Masamichi heard it clearly.

Half on reflex, words poured out of Masamichi.

“Specters do have sensibilities and the ability to feel!”

The corners of Shino’s mouth turned down in disapproval.

“How can you, a mere human, make such an assertion about me?”

“Sometimes, it’s easier for a different type of being to understand you. I don’t know about other specters, but you have a heart. Definitely.”

“...Hmph.”

For once, Shino turned his back to Masamichi, who kept his gaze steady. He was silent like a sulking child but eventually turned around to face Masamichi again with a wicked smile.

“Wh-what is it?”

Recognizing that the tides had turned, Masamichi withdrew a bit as Shino said, “I’ve just remembered something. About your college entrance exam...and career path.”

“Oh... Y-yes?!”

Masamichi quickly put down his teacup and sat up properly.

“You can question yourself and think all you want. Yeah...you can keep going back and forth about what you want to do for the next five years or so.”

“Huh?! W-wait a minute, Shino. Why are you saying that? The tuition at that prep school is very expensive.”

“Because you earned your tuition money for prep school.”

“...I did? When? How?”

Shino smiled like a carnivore facing a tasty piece of meat and said, “It’s compensation for Selwyn’s bad deed. Johnston has transferred a sum of money that would even make me do a double take.”

“What?! You’re kidding!”

Shino looked at Masamichi, who was completely flustered, with amusement in his eyes as if to get back at him for his earlier taunting.

“Take it. Johnston could settle it with money because it was no more than an attempt. It’s a fair price to pay if you think of it as the price for the life of that worthless secretary of his.”

“Ngh.”

Indeed, if Shino hadn’t come to the rescue when he did, Masamichi would have suffered scars on his mind and body that would stay with him for the rest of his life.

Without a doubt, Shino would have taken Selwyn’s life.

But five years’ worth of school fees...and an amount that would make even Shino look twice?!

Maybe Masamichi was living a little more comfortably now than he had been

before, but he still rarely carried a ten-thousand-yen note in his wallet. He couldn't start to imagine the amount of money that Lord Johnston had transferred to them, and it made him uneasy.

Oblivious, Shino ate the last bit of his cake and said in a rather indistinct tone, "Well, if you can decide what you want to do with your life sooner rather than later, we can use the money that would have gone to your prep school to... Yes, I wouldn't mind traveling to London again, this time purely to go sightseeing."

"Really?!"

"Of course, I'll take you along to carry my bags. I must say that I'm somewhat interested in the British Museum you mentioned."

As Masamichi listened to Shino's words, his rounded cheeks became flushed, and his round eyes, which reminded the specter of a Shiba Inu, began to sparkle.

"Okay! I'll do that right away... Of course, I'll put serious thought into it and consider everything, but I'll make up my mind as soon as I can! And I'll do plenty of research on the British Museum, too."

"Do that. And I need another cup of tea to push this cake completely down my throat."

"I'll go make you another cup right now."

Shino casually watched as Masamichi got up on his feet and rushed noisily to the kitchen.

Neither Masamichi nor, perhaps, Shino himself noticed the faint but somewhat warm smile that appeared on the specter's face...

This book is a completely revised and retitled paperback edition of *Him, a Specter, and Me, a Servant*, originally published by Az Novels, East Press, in March 2004.

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