





# THE CONTRACT BETWEEN A SPECTER AND A SERVANT

Michiru Fushino



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Michiru Fushino

Illustration by Aki Aoi



YEN  
ON  
New York



# Copyright



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## PROLOGUE

Somewhere in the Sakyo Ward of Kyoto, Japan, a young man took a break from digging with a beat-up shovel and wiped the stream of sweat pouring down his forehead.

It was only mid-June, but temperatures had soared to peak summer highs the day before.

According to the weatherperson on TV the night before, the heat was supposed to continue through the end of August.

*Why do I have to work outside at a time like this? Who does that meteorologist think they are, sitting in an air-conditioned room talking about how hot it is like it's someone else's problem?*

After unfairly cursing out the innocent weather forecaster, the young man glared at the sun, which blazed mercilessly overhead, and looked around.

He was at the construction site for a new residence.

It was a common occurrence—after the Japanese economic bubble burst, big, old houses were torn down, and the vast properties were split up for a neighborhood of prefab houses to be built.

Not that it was his job to build those houses. He was working on the exterior construction and landscaping. That meant the structures on the property outside the building. For example, the gate, fences, garage, front walkway, storage shed, and yard.

In the spring, he had started working for a company that dealt with a wide range of general exterior construction.

He had been hired to work in finance, but because they were short-staffed, he had been sent to this construction site under the premise of on-the-job training.



*I should have been working in a cool office by now.*

The man turned his attention to his colleagues, who were standing a short distance away.

They were busy preparing the foundation for the fence and the concrete for the walkway and seemed to have forgotten about him.

It was suspicious that he was the only one working in a different area.

Back when a big house existed on the property, there'd been a small shrine in the corner of the garden that was removed when construction began.

The young man was currently digging up the rocks that filled the spot where the shrine had been.

All remnants of the shrine needed to be removed before they started the landscaping work. However, even landscaping professionals hesitated to casually disturb a site where a sacred shrine had been cherished for many years.

And that was why a young guy with hardly any experience was given a pickax and a shovel and told to dig—a job that no one else wanted to do.

About twenty rocks needed to be removed. None were big, but they were firmly embedded in the earth, and the hard soil was a pain in the neck to break through.

"This is like an iceberg," the man mumbled to himself. "You can only see the top protruding from the ground. But I guess this isn't really the time to think about stuff like that."

Thus, the young man resumed his struggle against the rocks.

As he had noted, every rock appeared to be thin like a tile but was actually planted surprisingly deep in the ground. Maybe they were more like teeth.

*The people who lived here long ago must have done everything possible to ensure a firm, stable base so the shrine wouldn't topple over.*

While he could appreciate that, he had to face the hard truth—he had been working all morning and had only managed to dig out eight rocks. The construction site supervisor had come to him a while ago and snickered. *"Is that*

*all you've managed?"*

*The guy could have helped if he thought I was slow!*

The young man used his annoyance to fuel his physical strength and pushed the pointed tip of his shovel into the ground.

"You poor thing, having to do that all by yourself," a gruff voice said behind him. "You'd better make sure you go someplace for a cleansing ritual as soon as you're done."

The young man let go of the shovel, which was stuck in the ground, and turned around.

A small old man stood there, grinning. He looked familiar. He was one of the interior contractors who had come to the worksite two days earlier. This was the first time they had spoken to each other, but the young man had seen him walking around, holding wallpaper, a stepladder, and a bucket containing a paintbrush and a ruler. He figured the man was a plasterer.

"A cleansing ritual?"

The young man was taken aback by the dangerous-sounding suggestion, and the elderly plasterer flashed him a wicked smile, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"Oh, you didn't know? The shrine that used to be on the rocks you're digging out was there for centuries. I hear it had a *history*."

"A history? When they tore it down, I was told a Shinto priest came and did a purification ritual."

"They just did that so they'd feel better."

"Feel better—about what? Are you saying a powerful god was enshrined here or something?"

Seeing the serious look on the young man's face, the older man lowered his voice. Despite it being broad daylight, he spoke like he was telling a ghost story.

"I only heard it from my supervisor, but the shrine was empty for a long time."

The tension left the young man's body, and he slapped the handle on his shovel, saying, "Well then, it's just an empty shrine. What's there to be worried about?"

"Oh, but this is where it starts to get tricky. This area was a vast field during the Heian period, with nothing but this shrine. It's illustrated in an ancient picture scroll."

"It was that old?!"

"Yeah, though I'm sure it was rebuilt over and over. Anyway, I hear it said *comb shrine* on the picture scroll."

"'Comb shrine'?"

"Yeah! Like a comb you use to fix your hair."

"Oh, so it's a shrine dedicated to combs."

"A comb was probably the object of worship at the beginning. The wooden shrine eventually decayed. Scary, huh?"

"A comb is only a tool, and I don't see that as scary."

As the young man smiled wryly, the older man placed both hands on his salt-and-pepper head and gestured like he was combing imaginary long hair.

"It's a comb that women used long ago. People wouldn't have set up a shrine for it if it wasn't full of some woman's darkest emotions and grudges. It gives me the creeps," the old man said with a shudder.

"Then the shrine was set up for the female owner of a comb?"

"That's what makes sense to me. Generations of the estate's owners seemed to take good care of the shrine, but after the last owner died, the daughter's son-in-law inherited it. He wasn't a local—he was from Tokyo, so you can't blame him for not caring about the estate or the shrine. Before you know it, he tore everything down and sold the land."

"...Huh."

"I don't know who was enshrined here, but the shrine's god would naturally be upset at such poor treatment. That's why none of the local contractors

wanted to take on this job—they were afraid of being cursed—and it went to your company from Osaka, which didn't know anything about this history. I guess you drew the short end of the stick. I'd be careful if I were you."

After warning the young man again, the old plasterer left, puffing out smoke from his cigarette like a chimney.

He had intended to scare the young man. Still, there had to be some truth to what he'd said. The young man felt a chill run down his spine and trembled.

*A comb shrine? Geez. I wonder if a woman was enshrined here after dying with a grudge. Is she really angry that her shrine has been destroyed? No, I'm not going to think about it!*

The young man shook his head vigorously to drive away the fear rising in his mind. *It's okay. I'm a stranger—just here to do a job. The son-in-law is the one she'd be mad at, not me. I have nothing to do with this!*

Still, he was overwhelmed by a desire to finish this abominable job as soon as possible, so the young man once again picked up the shovel, placed a leg on top, and pushed his weight onto it.

*Oh. This is going to work.*

The shovel finally reached the top of a huge rock buried in the center.

The young man shook the shovel, and the rock wobbled.

"All right!"

He couldn't help shouting in joy. Using this leverage, he put his full weight on the shovel's handle, and the stone slowly emerged from underground and was lifted like a tooth extraction.

"Okay, the tough part's over."

Cheering himself on, the young man set the shovel on the ground and reached with both hands to pull the rock out.

He proudly placed it on top of the small mountain he was making with the other rocks he had removed from the site, then he noticed something in the hole from where he had pulled out the big rock.

“Hmm?”

Puzzled, he kneeled on the ground, scraped the soil off the surface with his gloved hands, and saw a salmon-pink object with a coarse texture.

“What’s this?”

The man was curious and started picking at the ground with his fingers. It was an unglazed earthenware pot about the size of a small pickle jar.

The pot was damp and slimy, sealed firmly with what appeared to be the hide of some animal.

“It’s light. Whoa! What the heck?”

He had placed the pot on the palm of his hand and was brushing off the dirt to examine it, when he cried out in surprise.

A peculiar text and patterns in black ink covered the pot’s surface.

It was similar to the calligraphic writing on a talisman issued by a shrine—the kind you often found in Japanese horror flicks.

“This is creepy!”

The man’s hair stood on end when he saw this.

*Isn’t this getting seriously bad?*

The man almost dropped the pot, but then caught it just in time and wrapped his hands around it securely—not that he wanted to—before running to the site supervisor.

But the supervisor frowned disapprovingly when the pale-faced young man showed him the pot.

The site supervisor wasn’t a huge man, but the look in his eyes was intimidating as he asked, “So what?”

Still shaking, the young man held out the pot, moving it closer to his supervisor.

“I found it under the rocks. It was buried under the shrine, and I thought it might be something dangerous with all these weird patterns.”



The supervisor sighed, then spat on the ground.

“I told you to dig up the rocks. I didn’t tell you to look for a pot.”

“Uh, I wasn’t looking for it; I just found it under a rock. It’s probably old, and, um, I think I recall seeing somewhere—on TV, I think—that we have to report it to the board of education or something.”

“You complete dimwit! We don’t have time for that!”

The young man flinched. The supervisor pointed to the sky.

“We’re already behind schedule because of all the rain we’ve been having, but the handover date isn’t going to budge an inch! Don’t you get that?”

“I’m aware.”

“Then you should know what to do with that pot or jar or whatever it is. If you report it to the authorities, and if it turns out to be ancient, they’ll tell us to stop the construction work, and we’ll be in deep trouble.”

As soon as the young man asked, “Then what should we do?” the supervisor slapped his employee’s right wrist hard without hesitation or warning.

“Oh!” The young man yelped in shock.

The sudden movement made him stagger back, and the small pot fell from his hand to the ground.

“Aaah!”

As if in slow motion, the pot plummeted and then shattered into pieces.

Looking smug, the supervisor said, “All you have to do is pretend you never found it. Finishing our work on time is more important than worrying about some pot.”

Panicked, the young man squatted and tried to pick up the pieces, but the supervisor was faster. He stepped on the debris and smashed it further.

“You didn’t have to do that...,” the young man muttered as he remained crouched down, stunned at what the supervisor had done.

“See? There’s nothing in there,” the supervisor spat out. “It’s just garbage. Now hurry up and get back to work. I’m firing you if you can’t move all those

rocks by the end of the day, and I'll leave you here when we go! And if you dig up another piece of trash, you're fired."

With this heartless rebuke, the supervisor turned his back on the young man and walked away.

"Oh...the poor thing, after surviving all this time."

Now that he knew nothing was inside the pot, the young man was no longer afraid and just felt sorry for it.

He looked at the shattered pieces, wondering if he could find some big enough to put back together, but the supervisor's heavy shoes had crushed the fragile pot to the point of no return.

"I'm sorry. No hard feelings, okay?"

Unsure if he was apologizing to the pot or the enshrined deity, the man folded his hands in prayer, bowed, then gave up and walked away.

There was nothing more he could do for the pot, so it was better to get back to work before the supervisor decided to chew him out again.

The young man regained his bearings and started walking away, when a strong wind suddenly blew.

*"Very good. As a reward, I will not eat you."*

"Huh?"

The young man was sure he'd heard a man's voice, so he stopped in his tracks and looked around.

"There's no one here... Am I hearing things? Ugh, I'm such a scaredy-cat."

He slapped his knees, told himself to pull it together, and returned to his assigned area.

Little did he know that a sudden whirlwind behind him had picked up the shattered fragments of the pot and carried them high into the sky.

# CHAPTER 1

## A Typical Example of the Worst

It was two in the afternoon on a day in March.

On University K's vast campus, in an area for the Agriculture Department, a large group of people had gathered.

They were of all ages and clad in varying styles of clothing, but every one of them had the same look of hope and uncertainty as they waited for the glass doors to open.

Masamichi Adachi, who was turning twenty that year, was one of them.

*Please, God. I don't know which god I should pray to, but please let them finally accept me this year.*

He had been praying like this since he woke up that morning.

He knew it was too late for prayers, but he couldn't help it.

His throat was burning terribly, and he couldn't stop coughing, so he retrieved a plastic tea bottle from his thin backpack and took a sip.

He'd felt rushed that morning and had arrived almost an hour before the scheduled time, so he was getting cold. It was no wonder, since he'd just been standing in one spot with nothing to do. His ankles stung, and his joints felt stiff.

*It's almost time for the results to be announced. I'm dying to see how I did. But then again, maybe it would be better to find out later. I would have brought heating pads if I'd known it was going to be so cold.*

Masamichi was rubbing his numb hands together to warm them up when a murmur arose from the crowd.

Three people in suits, the group everyone had been waiting for, came out of a nearby building.

The one who looked to be the oldest had a loudspeaker in hand, while the other two held rolled-up papers.

The senior man stepped in front of the bare wooden bulletin boards and brought his loudspeaker to his mouth, drawing everyone's attention.

*"Thank you all for waiting. We will now post the identification numbers of the applicants who have passed our university entrance exam!"*

With the crackling voice from the loudspeaker as their cue, the people who'd gathered outside the gate pushed forward to the bulletin boards.

This was what they had been anticipating.

Those results were also available online that day, but it was human psychology to want to see and feel the emotions firsthand at the site.

Masamichi moved with the crowd despite the numbness in his frozen feet.

With reverence and care, the two other university employees unrolled, spread, and pasted one sheet of paper after another on the bulletin boards.

A list of five-digit applicant numbers was printed neatly on the undecorated white paper.

The crowd pushed and shoved in front of the bulletin boards as people searched for their numbers. Some shouted in joy while others slumped in dejection.

A few embraced and celebrated with those who had been accepted. Others leaped in joy, while some suppressed their happiness and consoled friends who had not passed the test. Some were already recruited to join the school's clubs, and others checked the results and quietly walked away.

Amid such bright and dark scenes, Masamichi scanned the bulletin boards for his number.

*Oh, my number would be in that area.*

He hesitantly went through the people blocking his path and approached a sheet that had just been put up. That mere action was tough for a petite and skinny guy like him.

*Please, God, let them finally accept me this year,* Masamichi repeated in his mind with each step he took, as if chanting a spell.

But his desperate wish was not granted.

It was the same as the year before. Masamichi found the numbers before and after his, but his was missing.

He had failed.

That result was like a stab from a long spear; he felt it from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

*It happened again. They...rejected me. The people with the numbers before and after mine got in, but not me.*

All the energy went out of him, and he nearly collapsed, but the sea of people wouldn't allow that.

He was like a plastic bag floating on the ocean, carried by the tide from one place to another. By the time he managed to move away from the bulletin boards, he was a total wreck.

He staggered to a flower bed limply, like his heart had been pulled out of his body, and plopped down on the sturdy concrete edge.

He had been shivering from the cold earlier, but now he was chilled to the bone as if a block of ice had been shoved into his solar plexus. It was a sensation that froze the blood in his entire body.

*Did it mean anything to spend the past year studying?*

After failing the entrance exam for the same university a year ago, Masamichi had left his family home in Akita, in northern Japan, and moved alone to Kanagawa, where the university was located.

He was paying his rent with the modest savings he had accumulated from his allowance, New Year's gifts, and income from his part-time job. Since he couldn't afford a prep school, he had spent a lonely year relying on free study videos uploaded on the internet.

Not once had he returned to Akita. He had looked at pictures on social media of his classmates back home having a lively reunion at the beginning of the



year, while he snuggled up at a small heated *kotatsu* table in his rundown apartment, devoting himself to his studies.

And now this.

*I was sure I would be accepted this year. I had a good feeling about it.*

The initial shock had subsided slightly, and his heart slowly began to beat again.

*What am I going to do?*

Masamichi's phone vibrated in his coat pocket as if responding to his heartbreak.

He hurriedly pulled it out and saw his mother's name on the display.

Stifling the storm of emotions that immediately welled up inside, Masamichi pressed the talk icon and held the phone, which was warmed by his body heat, against his cold ear.

"Hello?"

*"Hi, Masamichi? How are you doing? You said today is the day the university announces the students it's accepting this year. Everyone's been wondering how you did."*

The fact that his mother, who usually communicated through text messages or e-mail, was calling him suggested that she couldn't wait to hear the results.

Masamichi had never felt this sorry, but lying would be pointless. Taking a deep breath, he suppressed the urge to scream and told her in as calm a voice as he could.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I failed again..."

That night, an unexpected event awaited Masamichi as he dragged himself to his part-time job.

He had worked for the past year at a pub that was part of a national chain and was located two stations away from his apartment.

He had managed to make ends meet by working five days a week, doing various tasks from preparing the restaurant before it opened to cleaning up

after it closed. The job was quite demanding, but the hourly wage wasn't bad, and the hearty meals they provided were great for a student studying to get into college.

The shock of failing the college entrance exam for the second time was tremendous. Still, he was grateful that the pub was busy that day, because he would be overwhelmed with sadness, bitterness, hesitation, and so on if he was idle.

Wanting to distract himself from the weight of reality for the time being, Masamichi put more effort into his work than usual.

After eleven PM, he sent off the last customer and started tidying up.

"Hey, Masamichi. Come here a minute," said the manager after checking the sales. Masamichi was cleaning the floor, but the manager went into the back office without waiting for a reply, expecting him to do as he was told.

The previous manager who had hired Masamichi had been a kindly, friendly, and approachable older man, while the new manager had come to the pub a month ago. He attended daily staff meetings before the business opened and gave instructions and advice, but Masamichi had never once engaged in a personal conversation with the man.

*I wonder what he wants. Has some customer complained about me?*

Somewhat nervous, he went to the back office and saw the manager frowning in front of a computer in the back of the room, wearing a jacket over his uniform.

He noticed Masamichi and wordlessly gestured with his fingers for him to come closer.

He seemed very arrogant, but a part-time worker like Masamichi had no right to be upset with the manager over something as trivial as this.

As Masamichi approached timidly, the manager didn't even smile.

"It will only take a second, so you can just stand there, okay?"

It sounded like a question but was an order to remain standing. Masamichi nodded and stayed next to the desk.

“Um, what is it, sir?”

“Yeah. Thanks for your hard work to date.”

Masamichi didn’t immediately understand what that meant and murmured a vague response.

That seemed to irritate the manager, who added:

“What I’m saying is that I think it’s time you thought about moving on.”

“Huh?!”

Masamichi finally realized that he was being fired, and he stepped closer to the desk.

“Wait a minute, sir! Have I done something wrong?”

The manager heaved an exaggerated sigh and leaned back in his chair with a *thud*.

“Maybe you haven’t done anything wrong, but gee.”

“Then why?”

“Why? You know why the previous manager was fired and I was hired in his place, right?”

As the manager said that dismissively, Masamichi recalled the gentle smile of his predecessor and answered hesitantly.

“I heard rumors that we weren’t too profitable.”

“That’s correct. See? You do know why.”

The manager snapped his fingers and lowered his voice.

“This pub has a fantastic location in front of a train station. But we aren’t doing too well because we have so many competitors. Unlike the rest of you, I was sent here under orders to make it profitable.”

Masamichi nodded, unable to think of a response.

“I want to produce results ASAP and be called back to the head office. If I don’t, I won’t be promoted and come out as the winner here. Do you understand that?”

“Y...yes, sir.”

The manager clicked his tongue at Masamichi’s bland response, then pulled out a sheet of paper he’d printed and slapped it on the desk in front of him.

“These are the results from our customer survey the other day. Take a look.”

Masamichi reluctantly reached for the paper and picked it up. It contained comments from customers who frequently came to the pub.

THE GIRLS AT THE PUB ARE GREAT. THEY’RE CUTE AND LIVELY.

THERE’S ONE GUY WHO WORKS HARD BUT IS SLOW.

I WANT A CLEARER DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE SMOKING AND NONSMOKING SECTIONS.

IT’S A PUB CHAIN, SO THE FOOD QUALITY VARIES, AND IT’S PRETTY GOOD HERE.

ONE OF THE STAFF IS GLOOMY AND A PARTY POOPER.

*Oh.*

The blood drained from Masamichi’s face.

The manager grabbed the sheet from Masamichi and read it out loud.

“‘There’s one guy who works hard but is slow’...a ‘gloomy party pooper.’ Hey, Masamichi? I asked our staff who they thought this was; everyone said it was you. You can figure it out yourself, can’t you?”

Masamichi nodded and hung his head, unable to speak.

He knew what he was like.

He had been an introverted child.

Being a weak only child had made his parents protective, and they hadn’t let him play outside often.

Because he hadn’t had much contact with kids his age, he was shy and withdrawn when he entered kindergarten and had trouble being assertive and approaching others. A foundation had been created for the person Masamichi Adachi was today.

He was always a target for teasing and mockery from his classmates, though he wasn't seriously picked on, which may have been because his lack of response made it boring for them.

During his high school years, he had been nicknamed *Air*.

He'd had no friends and no one to fight with. He hadn't participated in extracurricular activities, and his grades had been average, as was his appearance.

The other kids probably couldn't come up with anything other than *Air* since he had been the very picture of a boy who was neither good nor bad.

When he left home and started living independently, he chose to work at this pub not only because of its favorable conditions but also because he wanted to change.

That was why he gathered up his courage and joined his fellow part-timers when they invited him to go to theme parks or out drinking, but he could never say anything witty or enjoy himself as the others had. In short, he was an outcast.

They eventually stopped inviting him, and he was off the other employee's friends lists on social media.

He had trouble matching the excited energy of drunken customers. He could not engage in light conversation like the other employees, which set him apart even more.

Still, he believed that if he worked hard and helped customers with all his heart, then at least his sincerity would be conveyed. That's why the harsh comments were shocking.

*I had no idea the customers thought about me like that.*

"Hey, you know they're talking about you, right? Correct me if I'm wrong. Who's this guy they're talking about, huh?"

Grinning maliciously like a cat toying with a mouse, the manager leaned forward and looked into Masamichi's face.

"...Yes, sir."



“I can’t hear you!”

The manager shouted at Masamichi when he replied in a faint voice, and his entire body stiffened.

“You look like you’re on your way back from a funeral. This is why people complain that you’re glum and say your voice is too quiet. Tell me who this guy is that everyone’s complaining about!”

Feeling as if he was about to cry, Masamichi squeezed out his voice as best he could.

“Me...sir.”

“I can’t hear you!”

“Me!”

The manager looked at Masamichi with disdain.

“Don’t cry over something trivial like this. I’m the one who wants to cry. So okay, I know you work hard. But you’re also the one who spoils the fun, bright atmosphere here. You’re dragging us all down, and that isn’t good. That would impact sales, wouldn’t it?”

“...Yes, sir.”

“Don’t you think it would be better for our business if you left and we replaced you with a cute and lively girl? Wouldn’t that make the customers happy?”

“I...think so,” Masamichi acknowledged in a trembling voice. Then he raised his face a fraction and saw the manager frowning. “Does that mean I’m fired?”

“Huh? No way. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Huh?!”

The manager’s unexpected words brought a slight glimmer of hope to Masamichi’s puppylike eyes.

But the manager said matter-of-factly:

“For me to fire you, there are some tricky rules, like the need for a proper reason or a month’s warning, though it’s okay if you absolutely insist on being

fired. But do you honestly think you could work here for another month like nothing's happened? Do you want to keep dragging us down?"

"Uh..."

"It's okay. That's your right, and I respect that. We're a legit company. I won't ever fire you. It's just that it would be nice if you would think about your fellow workers and, above all, what's best for our customers, then decide what course you want to take."

"Are you suggesting...that I...?"

"Hey, I'm not forcing you to do anything. I'm asking you to think hard about what you want to do. So what do you want to do? Huh? Tell me."

Gone was the pushy tone the manager had been using for power harassment—now he spoke like a cat purring sweetly.

His assertion that he was neither firing nor intimidating him had Masamichi completely confused.

The manager continued speaking gently but persistently.

"I'm a busy man, too, so quick, give me your answer. What are you going to do?"

After saying that as if he was in a rush, the manager started mouthing the same phrase—over and over.

There was nowhere to escape.

All the energy left Masamichi when he realized that. The only thing he could do was verbalize what the manager was mouthing.

"I'd like to quit...as of today," he said with a trembling voice.

"Oh yeah?! You're still too quiet, but I just managed to hear you. Hey, it's a shame. A real shame, but I respect your decision and won't stop you. Good job."

The manager's bright tone told Masamichi how badly he had wanted Masamichi to quit and his joy that it finally happened. It was too much for Masamichi, and he felt the tears coming on.

Masamichi's pride wouldn't allow him to cry in front of the manager, so he bowed deeply and spun around on his heel without another word.

He opened the door and was about to leave when the manager's peppy voice dealt another blow.

"Hey, don't forget to hand in your uniform. And clean out your locker so you don't leave any personal belongings behind. Don't forget: Taking anything from the pub as a memento is stealing. You're no longer one of us, and I won't hesitate to call the police."

It was too painful for Masamichi to nod in response to the heartless words, so he just quietly closed the door behind him...

He hadn't ever imagined the day would come when *trudge* would so suit his heavy footsteps.

Masamichi walked along a dark, deserted street.

He had been riding his bicycle to work because his shift didn't end until after the last train left.

Come to think of it, his bicycle had been stolen. That was the first bad omen.

He had been forced to walk to and from work, but those days were over.

"I thought I'd been doing well," he lamented feebly.

He had managed to hold back after leaving the pub and passing the train station, an area that was lively late into the night, but as soon as he walked into the residential area, he finally burst into tears.

Masamichi's eyes were like a broken faucet, and his cheeks were soaked. He grew tired of wiping his tears.

There were sure to be many stains on his jacket from the tears that dripped from his chin. He hadn't cried so hard since elementary school.

*The university rejected me, and now I've been fired from my part-time job... Oh, I mean, I was forced to quit.*

Masamichi stuck a hand in his pocket.

He pulled out a thin office envelope. It contained a single bill—a thousand

yen.

He had been in despair, changing at his locker after effectively being fired, when the manager came and slipped it into his pocket.

*“I forgot. Here’s a parting gift. Masamichi, it’s a big loss for us when a highly qualified person like you leaves. We’ll miss you!”*

Contrary to his words, he spoke rapidly and loudly so the staff members who were still around, preparing items for the next day, would hear him.

*He didn’t sound like he’d miss me at all. He sounded happy. I didn’t know some people would be that happy to have me gone.*

Now that he was jobless, even a thousand-yen note was needed to make ends meet, and he didn’t have the nerve to throw it back in the manager’s face anyway.

A longtime employee had approached him after the manager left, looking awkward as he said, *“Sorry. Manager’s orders,”* and checked Masamichi’s bag to ensure he hadn’t stolen anything.

Despite the humiliation, Masamichi said, *“Thank you,”* feeling miserable and hating himself. All he could do was squeeze the envelope in his pocket.

*The university doesn’t want me, and that pub doesn’t want me, either. Many staffers were still there, but no one even bothered saying good-bye, though they seemed to know I was fired.*

Masamichi recalled the faces of his colleagues—or rather, former colleagues—glancing his way with guilty expressions, and fresh tears rolled down his cheeks.

He’d never gotten close enough to any of them to call them friends. Still, he had worked with them for most days of the week for almost a year, exchanging greetings and talking about work.

Yet not one was sad to see him go, and none offered to keep in touch.

That cruel fact battered Masamichi mercilessly.

*I know, I know. It’s all my fault. Everyone was nice to me, asking me to go out with them. I’m the one who couldn’t blend in. I didn’t know how to act so they’d*

*like me. I should have at least pretended to enjoy myself, but I couldn't even manage that much.*

He vaguely recalled the long jump rope that his grade school homeroom teacher had made the whole class play with during recess. The current state of his relationship with people was similar to that experience.

It was a game where two kids held either end of a long rope and spun it as the other kids took turns joining the jump. It was a success if everyone in the class could jump in unison and a failure if someone got caught in the rope.

There wasn't a penalty or anything when someone disrupted the game, but the other kids tended to give them a cold look for ruining their efforts.

Masamichi had always messed things up when he jumped rope; the other kids had him just stand at the end and hold it. Because it had been tough for Masamichi to hear the disappointed groans from his classmates when he mistimed his jump, he eventually started holding the rope without the others telling him to do so. He and his homeroom teacher were always the ones who held the rope. Because of their difference in size and Masamichi's lack of physical strength, his shoulder always hurt when they played the game.

Yet the homeroom teacher would call to him from the other end, saying, *"Isn't this fun?!"* with a desperate, fake smile. That memory made Masamichi sigh heavily.

*It's the same as that time. I didn't know when I should jump in, and when I did, I would always ruin it and annoy everyone. It hurt, and it was hard to keep swinging that rope, but I forced myself to smile because all the other kids were enjoying themselves. I haven't changed at all.*

But he had even fumbled the rope spinning many times. He recalled how the teacher would say to him, *"Masamichi. What is it that you can do?"* and stopped on the side of the road.

Sad memories from the past blended with the two shocking events of that day, and his thoughts were filled with a murky darkness.

*I can't do anything right. That isn't all. I always cause trouble for others. No one needs me. No, that isn't right. Everyone would probably be better off if I*



*disappeared.*

It wasn't the first time that Masamichi had felt such despair.

Since childhood, he had nurtured a beast of shadows in his heart. He fed it every time he failed at something or upset someone, and the creature was now showing its fangs.

"It's pointless to keep walking."

Farther up the street was his lonely apartment, where no one awaited him.

And unless he could find a new job, he would lose even that.

"I have no one, and I have nothing."

As he muttered to himself, he felt drained of all energy.

Perhaps it was because of the freely flowing tears that clouded his vision.

When Masamichi came to his senses, a dazzling white light blinded him, and a loud car horn vibrated violently in his eardrums.

"Huh...?!"

It was too late when he realized the light was coming from a car speeding down the narrow road.

Masamichi stood there, stunned.

The car approached at top speed, the driver neglecting to step on the brakes, and rammed into him.

Before he could scream from the intense pain in his legs, he was hit hard in the chest and choked.

*Thud. Rip. Squish.*

Heavy, dull sounds the likes of which he had never heard before rang out as Masamichi felt his body floating in the air like pieces of dust.

It's often said that one's life flashes before their eyes when they die.

But Masamichi didn't receive that luxury.

He was smashed to the ground with tremendous force, and he finally realized he had been hit by a car.

His collarbone bent and made an unpleasant sound.

“Ugh...!”

The breathlessness was worse than the pain, and he wanted to curl up, but no part of his body would move the way he wanted it to.

“Shit!”

That had to be the driver who’d hit him. They must have realized what had happened and returned to the scene.

He heard a car door opening, then voices and footsteps. But someone said, “Let’s get out of here,” and they got back in the car without checking on Masamichi. They revved the engine, and the car roared away.

*So this...is what it’s like to be hit by a car.*

Feeling the cold and hard asphalt against his cheek, Masamichi lay on the ground like an abandoned piece of garbage.

He wanted to move but couldn’t. Breathing roughly, he struggled to turn his neck and saw his right arm, barely in sight, bent awkwardly in an impossible angle.

His left arm and both legs were probably in a similar state.

*No wonder I can’t move anything. Everything’s unbelievably broken.*

Amazed and even a little mellow, Masamichi exhaled weakly.

He wanted to take a deep breath but couldn’t inhale. It was hard to breathe, and fresh tears welled in his eyes.

The little air he could inhale smelled and tasted like blood.

Strangely enough, he now felt very little pain. Rather, there was an odd sensation as if most of his body had vanished.

An itchy numbness spread throughout his body, and sleepiness crept in.

He was convinced that he was dying.

*The driver didn’t even try to help me. I guess my life isn’t worth anything after all.*

Masamichi felt no anger toward the hit-and-run driver. His heart was only filled with quiet loneliness and resignation.

*What a way to die—at the end of the worst day of my life. But it doesn't matter now. I don't care about anything anymore.*

His vision gradually blurred, and his eyelids became heavier.

*I didn't know it was so easy to die.*

Surprised at how simply everything was about to end for him, Masamichi slowly closed his eyes and helplessly waited for his life to fade away.

But.

*Click, click, click...*

From somewhere in the distance came the sound of footsteps.

It seemed to be one person walking quickly at a steady pace, like a metronome.

It must have been an adult.

*Is someone here...to help me?*

It was too late to save him.

But he would appreciate it if the person at least contacted the police.

What if he was left in this state until morning, and a child were to find him? They would be traumatized for life, and that was the one thing Masamichi wanted to avoid.

He was worrying about others, even in a state like this. Masamichi closed his eyes and listened to the footsteps walking straight toward him.

Then the footsteps stopped near his head.

He could sense someone breathing above.

Perhaps the person was too stunned by his state to even scream.

As Masamichi absentmindedly wondered about the silence, he suddenly heard a man's voice. It was low, clear, and pleasant.

“The smell of blood lured me here, but well, well. This is quite a sight.”

Never mind screaming—Masamichi heard laughter and even amusement in the voice.

*It looks like a strange person has come at a peculiar time.*

There he was, all set to die a peaceful death, and then this guy had come along.

Masamichi was curious about the man and didn't want to pass away without some answers.

He forced open his heavy eyelids and tried to get a glimpse of the man.

The first thing he saw was shoes, which glowed faintly in the darkness.

The toes of the man's shiny, polished, and expensive-looking loafers were close enough to kick Masamichi in the face if he took another step.

He wondered what a person wearing such fine shoes looked like.

Masamichi was so intrigued that he tried desperately to encourage his motionless body to move so he could turn over onto his back.

Perhaps noticing the movement, the man laughed.

"Oh, you're still alive. You're a stubborn one despite that frail-looking body."

*Hey, isn't that a terrible thing to say?*

He couldn't believe the man would see him in his current state and say, "Oh, you're still alive," instead of "Are you okay?" or "Should I call an ambulance?"

Oblivious to Masamichi's shock, the man crouched down.

Despite his inability to move, Masamichi could finally see his face.

*Are you kidding?*

Despite his mortal wounds, Masamichi couldn't help but be amazed.

The man was young and had a remarkably well-defined face.

The line from his sharp cheekbones to his jaw was smooth, and his forehead was just the right width.

Beneath the somewhat impudent curve of his eyebrows were a pair of slender, brightly lit eyes, a high bridged nose, and pale lips, which smiled coolly.

He had perfect looks. Masamichi wouldn't be surprised if he was a model or an actor. He was so perfect that it was hard to believe he was human.

*Maybe an angel has come to take me away. But wait, an angel wouldn't say terrible things like that. Maybe he's the devil...*

One side of the man's mouth curved up, as if he could read Masamichi's mind.

"Hey, I'm talking to you. Stop staring and answer me."

The man didn't seem at all concerned about the terrible state of Masamichi's body.

*What is with this guy?*

Masamichi had been about to die peacefully—or rather, *was* about to die peacefully, and now this man had come along and grabbed his attention.

But it was hard for him to speak when he could barely breathe.

"...Who...are...you?" Masamichi managed to whisper hoarsely.

Oddly enough, the man seemed to have heard his faint question and suddenly glared at him.

"You have some nerve, attempting to learn about me when you're a mere mortal on the verge of death. Do you realize the state you're in?"

The man stretched out his arm as he spoke, picked something up, and dangled it in front of Masamichi's nose.

Unable to scream, Masamichi only hissed softly.

The man was casually dangling Masamichi's leg. It looked like part of a mannequin, but surely enough, it was wearing one of Masamichi's basketball shoes. From the shape of the shoe, it was his right leg.

His right leg, which had supported Masamichi's body until a moment ago, was cruelly severed at the calf, exposing broken bones and torn muscles through the fresh wound.

"You've got...to be kidding."

"I imagine you've been run over by a car or something. This leg was torn off and rolling on the ground. Incidentally, the other limbs are also broken and in

terrible shape. Your collarbone is also shattered, and your chest is moving strangely. And I doubt that any of your ribs are intact.”

While speaking calmly and somewhat happily, the man put his nose close to the wound on Masamichi’s leg. He smelled it and nodded in satisfaction.

“Not bad. This is a good opportunity. Let’s give it a try.”

*Give what a try?*

He was unable to see his dire condition, and Masamichi was preoccupied with the behavior of the man in front of him anyway.

Then the man did something Masamichi never expected. Without hesitation, he licked the blood leaking from the torn leg with the tip of his tongue.

The man tasted the blood and simply said, “Oh,” despite Masamichi’s astonishment. “Interesting. The curse is not activated with the flesh and blood of a living person if it has been separated from the body. That’s good to know.”

*What on earth...? What is this man talking about?*

Masamichi’s eyes, which were supposed to be closed forever, widened nearly to the point of popping out of his head, and his gaze was glued to the beautiful man in front of him.

But Masamichi’s surprise would not end there.

“Well, then,” the man said in a singsong voice, then opened wide and bit into Masamichi’s leg.

“Eep...!!”

Masamichi was horrified.

*Slch. Slurp. Mmm...*

The stranger made crude sounds as he licked his fat, slurped his blood, and chewed his flesh.

The man’s beautiful, snow-white face was quickly marred by red blood. Masamichi just watched, trembling.

At any other time, he would have run as fast as he could.

But in his current state, it was hard to even turn his back on the man, never mind run.

*Is this really happening?*

The man was completely focused on devouring Masamichi's leg.

This was a scene one wouldn't even see in a horror movie. He wasn't sure if it was really happening.

Masamichi could no longer tell if the scene before him was real or a hallucination brought on by his impending death.

The man finally looked up when Masamichi began feeling dizzy again and was about to lose consciousness, this time for good.

Upon realizing that Masamichi was about to depart for the other side, the man tossed aside the leg without hesitation and grabbed Masamichi by the collar of his blood-soaked jacket.

He pulled up Masamichi's limp body and delivered a hard blow to the young man's cheek.

"Ugh...ngh!"

Once again brought back from the brink of death, Masamichi opened his eyes.

The man pulled Masamichi's bloodstained face close to his and said coldly, "Don't die on me now. You still have something to do."

"Something...to...do?"

"Yeah. It's been about a thousand years since I last ate human meat and blood, but you are truly delicious. I thought it was because I hadn't indulged for a long time, but that's not it. Your blood is thick and sweet, yet pure. And your flesh has just the right chewiness and a rustic, wild flavor. It isn't at all bad."

Who would expect to be evaluated on the taste of their blood and flesh at the end of their life?

*I can't have him doing a food review on my body...! I am totally lost.*

Masamichi wanted to but couldn't say what was on his mind. The most he could do was glare reproachfully at the man.

But the man ignored Masamichi's modest protests and said, "You. If you die, I'll take full responsibility for eating every inch of your body, so go in peace."

*That isn't very reassuring.*

The man didn't seem to get any of these messages that Masamichi tried to convey with his eyes.

"It would be a shame to consume all this delicious flesh and blood now. I want to save it."

*Really, what is this man talking about? Isn't this a superbad situation? Could he be a murderer or something...? But wait, being a murderer doesn't mean you eat human flesh raw. Maybe he's a true meat lover...but no, human meat isn't usually included.*

Masamichi wanted to know who the man was, but the blood loss fogged up his mind, and his brain was riddled with silly speculations.

As if annoyed with Masamichi, the man slapped him lightly on the cheek again and said, "To thank you for the delicious meat and blood, I will make you a proposal that can only benefit you. Be my servant."

"...Huh?"

Masamichi was so surprised that his voice came out strangely clearly. He blinked his eyelids, which were no longer moving freely, several times in desperation as he tried to convey, "What the hell are you talking about?"

The man was serious. His mouth was bloody, and he looked like a clown, but he wasn't joking.

"Be my servant," he repeated, then continued, "Be my servant, work for me, and be my food. Do that, and I will restore your body mostly to its former state and give you food and shelter. I will treat you well."

Maybe it was just the feeling of dying, but Masamichi was stunned.

He didn't know who the man was but knew he was a liar.

Even the best doctors couldn't save Masamichi at this point, but here this guy was, saying he'd restore his body mostly to its former state...



*“Mostly to its former state”?*

Those words stuck in Masamichi’s mind and caused his lips to move a fraction.

The man read it correctly and shrugged, still crouching.

“I don’t know how your body was before, so there will be some guesswork when I make repairs. I’ll also have to fill in the places that I ate.”

“Wh-what...are you...sayi—?!”

Masamichi desperately gasped out the words, but the man nonchalantly interrupted.

“Don’t worry. It’s just a human body. With my aesthetic sensibilities, you may have a better body than before.”

The man stood up, smiling at Masamichi, who was dumbfounded. His movements were as graceful as a cat.

“How about it? Don’t you want to live?”

Because the man was now standing, Masamichi felt like his words were falling upon him from above. It was like a question from an unknown god.

*There’s no use going on with my life. That’s what I thought, so I might as well move on.*

He wanted to die quietly.

As Masamichi was about to form the words with his lips, a voice he knew well suddenly echoed in his mind.

*“It’s okay.”*

That was what his mom had said earlier in the day. The way she stretched out the *oh* in *okay* was typical of her, gentle and relaxed.

It was the first thing she had said when he apologized for failing to get into college.

*“It’s okay.”*

She wasn’t a native of his hometown, Akita, and usually spoke in standard

Japanese, so it had been rare for her to sound like a local—laid-back and relaxed.

She had probably wanted to give him a taste of his hometown and ease his disappointment.

*“What’s there to apologize about? You’re working hard to support yourself while studying to get into college all by yourself.”*

Her son’s second failed attempt at becoming a college student must have been a great shock to her. Still, she was bright and cheerful.

His mother’s voice spurred his longing for home and made him admit his true feelings.

*“I’m sure Dad and Granddad will be disappointed to hear that I’ve failed to get into college for the second time. I feel bad. Maybe it’s about time I gave up.”*

Masamichi wanted to study agriculture because he had watched his father and his grandfather, both full-time farmers, struggle yearly with disasters, pests, and diseases. He wasn’t as strong as they were and would not be able to carry on the family business, but he was determined to contribute to developing strong, high-yielding, and tasty vegetables.

His father and his grandfather had been very proud of him when they heard that.

And Masamichi felt a deep sense of guilt for having betrayed their expectations two years in a row.

But his mother remained cheerful.

*“Of course, your dad, your granddad, and I all have hopes for you. But that hope isn’t just to have you study agriculture and become a researcher. We want you to live a happy and productive life.”*

Masamichi was so struck by his family’s love—so casually expressed—that he was at a loss for words when his mother continued:

*“Don’t worry about us. You think about your future and decide for yourself. If you ever feel lonely, you can always come home and visit. We’ll talk over a cup of tea. I’m always here for you. But the decision is yours. We aren’t in control of*

*your life.”*

His mother’s message overwhelmed him.

Every word she said was like a ray of light shining gently on the shadow over Masamichi’s heart.

*Mom said she wanted me to have a happy, productive life, yet I was about to give up and throw away the life I’ve been given.*

Regret, far heavier than the disappointment he had felt before, stabbed Masamichi in the chest.

“I...I...”

*I’ll make Mom, Dad, and Granddad sad if I die here now, and they’ll regret it for the rest of their lives. But if I live, then maybe...*

Clinging to his mother’s words, Masamichi turned to face the world of the living again.

As if responding to his change of heart, the man spoke in a chilling tone.

“What do you want to do? Do you want to live or die? You decide. Decide to die, and I will eat you. Decide to live, and you will be my servant.”

It was a ridiculous choice, no matter how you looked at it, and Masamichi couldn’t even start to imagine what it would be like to be the man’s servant.

Still, if agreeing to be his servant helped him survive, it could be better than just waiting to die. No, it should be much better.

“...I...”

Masamichi’s voice was no louder than a tiny insect fluttering its wings, but the man seemed to hear him and nodded in acknowledgment. The man’s slow blink conveyed that he had been heard.

Masamichi used all his remaining strength to suck in as much air as he could and spoke his heartfelt words weakly but clearly.

“I...will...live.”

The man narrowed his eyes.

“Human, tell me your true name without pretense.”

The command that shot out of the man’s mouth was as sharp as a whip. Masamichi had never considered using a false name, but somehow, he understood there would be no going back if he gave his name.

With some trepidation, but reminding himself that he had no choice, Masamichi told the man his name for the first time.

“M-Masamichi...Adachi.”

“Fine. With that, you shall be mine, both body and soul.”

The man announced this a bit solemnly and got down on one knee, then placed his bony white hands on Masamichi’s broken sternum, which had been snapped in half and dented.

“The deal is done. My servant. I will mend your flesh.”

With that, the palm of his hand began to glow with silver light on Masamichi’s chest.

This silver light was dazzling, sacred, and serene. However, Masamichi could not enjoy its beauty to his heart’s content.

*Boom!*

His heart beat with an intensity he had never experienced, and he could feel the boiling blood rushing at breakneck speed throughout his body, where he should have had no sensation.

“Ngh...! Ah. Aaahh!!”

The pain from his many injuries flooded his brain at once.

A massive amount of frothy blood began flowing from Masamichi’s mouth as he was hit with excruciating agony.

“Gah...ah!”

That was all he could remember. His vision went black like a switch was flipped, and Masamichi’s consciousness slipped into bottomless darkness...

## CHAPTER 2

### An Enigmatic Person

Masamichi swam through deep, dark water, aiming for a shimmering light far above.

The cold water wrapped around Masamichi's body, unwilling to let him go, but he shook it off with his legs and pushed back against the onslaught of water pressure.

*Ah, it's wonderful to be able to move...!*

He was happy that he could control his arms and legs well enough to swim vigorously, which far outweighed the feeling of suffocation he experienced.

*I'm alive. I'm alive!*

Filled with joy, Masamichi swam toward the surface.

*Splash!*

When his face finally poked out of the still water, Masamichi's eyes snapped open.

"Huh?"

The cold water that he had felt a moment ago had disappeared completely.

Covering his body in its place was a heavy cotton blanket.

"What the...?"

Unable to understand what was happening, Masamichi blinked and turned to look around.

"Where am I?"

He was lying on a bed against a wall in a small, strange room.

It wasn't the hard bed in his apartment. It seemed like a high-quality

mattress. His whole body felt firmly yet gently supported.

*This bed must have caused the heavy, water pressure–like sensation.*

As comfortable as it was, the classic buckwheat-hull pillow—which he wasn’t used to sleeping on—was very hard and caused a dull ache in the back of his head.

When he took a breath, Masamichi coughed loudly, brought on by the smell of dust and mold.

The blanket didn’t seem to have been cared for in a long time. Its weight was probably from absorbing plenty of moisture.

With one hand, Masamichi began pushing the blanket down toward his stomach and tried to sit up on the bed.

He immediately felt a sharp pain throughout his body and fell back with a groan.

“Ow... What the hell is going on...?”

The pain seemed to have cleared the haze in his mind. The events that had transpired before he lost consciousness sped through his memory like a fast-forwarded video through a kaleidoscope.

*Oh, I was hit by a car, my body was a wreck, and I almost died...then I met an incredibly beautiful man who was also incredibly strange.*

Struggling with a cough that wouldn’t stop and pain that wouldn’t subside, Masamichi desperately tried to recall what had happened.

*Didn’t he tell me to be his servant if I wanted to live...? And that he’d get my messed-up body back to normal?*

Masamichi thought about how his arm had been twisted at a strange angle, and shuddered.

But the hit-and-run, the near-death experience, and his interaction with the mysterious man all seemed unreal. It all seemed like a terrible nightmare.

“A nightmare... A dream. Hey, maybe it was a dream,” Masamichi whispered.

Then he lay down and gently lifted his hands to his face.

He could bend his arms at the elbow joints in the right direction. He could open and close his hands.

He slowly lifted one leg at a time. There was some pain, but he could move them however he wanted.

But all the muscles and bones throughout his body screamed like he'd had a strenuous workout the day before.

"For some reason, it hurts all over, but nothing seems broken or torn."

As soon as he said "torn," he had a terrifying vision.

It was hard to believe that the man he had seen existed. Heck, he had been *eating* Masamichi's torn leg.

Masamichi's entire body shivered as he recalled the man's pale face.

*Something like that couldn't possibly...*

"It couldn't happen in real life," he muttered aloud. "Stuff like that only happens in zombie movies."

Precisely. So okay, he was hit by a car. That much must have actually happened. But from that point onward, it was all a bunch of nonsense—in which case, it had to have been a delusion from the shock of the hit-and-run.

Of course he would be in pain if he'd been in a car accident. It was miraculous that this was the extent of his injuries.

What was odd was that he was now in a strange room. Perhaps some kind soul had found him lying on the ground after the hit-and-run and taken him home with them.

*But who would do something like that instead of calling an ambulance? I'm a total stranger to them... Would that happen?*

Suddenly feeling uneasy, Masamichi carefully sat back up.

As expected, his whole body tensed, and the slightest movement caused pain. But it wasn't so bad that he couldn't move, as long as he got used to it.

Masamichi looked around again and saw that the room had a vintage style and felt very lived-in.

The twin-size bed had a plain wooden headboard.

The walls were painted a greenish-brown color with a rough texture, and the floor was a low-pile carpet, but there might have been tatami mats underneath.

Only the aluminum blinds on the windows, perhaps remodeled, were modern, and just one side let in enough sunlight to brighten the room.

Everything else in the room—the cedar planks on the ceiling with a few stains that looked like rain leaks, the square pendant-type light, the heavy chest of drawers, and the beautifully carved wooden mirror stand—were like a time capsule from the past Showa era.

Of course, Masamichi did not exist during the Showa era, but his grandparents, especially his late grandmother, had had a room like this.

In that sense, the unfamiliar room seemed nostalgic.

However, there was a lot of dust on the bedding, headboard, light fixture, and other furniture. The carpets' original color had probably been more vibrant than what he saw.

"I wonder if no one has used this room for a long time. Maybe it was unoccupied, so they brought me here."

Masamichi was very grateful, but that aside, everything was so dusty. His allergies weren't as bad as when he was a child, but he was still allergic to house dust, so the room was not an ideal environment.

He continued to cough intermittently, and his ribs ached every time he did, so he decided to cover his nose and mouth with the sleeves of his shirt as a makeshift mask, when he realized something horrifying.

He had no sleeves—because he wasn't wearing anything.

He was buck naked. He carefully pulled off the blanket so the dust wouldn't fly all over and found that he wasn't even wearing his underwear.

"Why?!"

Masamichi screamed this time and began searching, but his clothes were nowhere in sight.



Fortunately, no one else was in the room, so it wasn't an issue of being seen. Still, he was uncomfortable in his present state.

And wrapping the blanket around his body would only worsen his coughing fits.

"Oh, geez...why am I naked...? Huh?!"

Unable to find anything to hide himself with, Masamichi glanced at his body, realized something, and cocked his head.

Faint, wispy, pale-red lines ran all over his body. They looked like the red pen marks he had scribbled on his arm when he was a child and had had trouble washing off.

"What is this? Oh!"

The clearest line was low on his right leg. As Masamichi gazed at the undulating line with wonder, he recalled the mysterious man again.

"Oh yeah, that guy was chewing on my right leg. He looked like he enjoyed it and commented on how it tasted. I dreamed my leg was torn off my body, and the wound was jagged—just like this line."

Masamichi's naked body trembled.

"Wasn't that...a dream...? It had to be. But..."

But his leg was fine, he told himself. He was still anxious, though, and drew his right knee to his chest and tried to check that everything else, mysterious line aside, was okay with his right leg.

However, his vision was pretty good despite his days of studying, so he noticed a crucial fact that he wished he hadn't.

"My birthmark! It isn't there!"

A cry of despair rose from Masamichi's throat as he finally stopped coughing.

He had been born with an oval brown birthmark on the inside of his right calf that looked like a cluster of small moles. His mother had affectionately called the two-centimeter-long birthmark "*the pork cutlet on your leg.*"

*Dad used to make a terrible joke, saying he'd recognize me anywhere if*

*something ever happened to me, but now that something's happened to me, the mark has disappeared!*

He reminisced about that bittersweet memory for a moment before remembering something even more unpleasant.

The mystery man had grinned, with Masamichi's blood trailing down his lips, when he'd said he would restore his body *"mostly to its former state."*

*Mostly...to its former state.*

Masamichi was about to mutter that the weirdness didn't mean those things had truly occurred, when the pieces started coming together.

His right leg must have been torn off in the hit-and-run at the spot where the pork cutlet had been.

And because that man had eaten the skin without noticing the birthmark, he hadn't thought to put it back where it had been.

Masamichi didn't want to believe it, but everything made sense when he thought about it like that.

*"It was a nightmare, but it wasn't a dream. It really happened."*

If that were the case, the light red lines running all over his body were the remnants of the wounds he had suffered in the accident, which the man had repaired. That also made sense.

*"I mean, I'm not convinced, but it does make sense. But wait, how can logic like that exist? I was definitely dying. No way could a human being fix it like this, leaving only thin lines on my body and terrible muscle pain!"*

Greatly disoriented and in a mild panic, Masamichi struck the soft mattress and shouted.

Then an unexpected response came from outside the closed door.

*"Of course they couldn't. How could a mere human do something like that?"*

*"Eep!"*

It was a familiar male voice.

*Wait a sec. Don't tell me that's... It couldn't be.*

The next moment, Masamichi's doubts turned to certainty.

The man opened the heavy wooden sliding door without knocking and entered the room, looking as beautiful as a marble statue or a figure in a painting.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no...I knew I wasn't dreaming. He was real! Oh my god!"

The horror movie-like events that followed the hit-and-run had happened after all.

Shocked by the reminder and, at the same time, panicked by the fact that he was completely naked, Masamichi still did not pull the blanket over himself. Instead, he hugged his knees to his chest and tried to make his body as small as possible and reduce the exposed areas.

Paying no attention to Masamichi's efforts, the man stomped into the room and placed a paper bag on the bed.

"You're finally awake. All right, perfect. Put that on."

*Not "hello" or "are you okay?"*

"U-um..."

Masamichi continued to clutch his knees, so the man's expression became annoyed, and he clicked his tongue.

"You've been mostly asleep for three days, and your brain still isn't working? I didn't touch it since it looked okay, but I should have rebuilt everything inside out."

"W-wait a minute. You can't do that! Or rather, um, you saved my life, didn't you?"

"Isn't that obvious? You're not trying to pretend you've forgotten, are you? Don't think for a second that you can get away with it. Should you violate our contract, your heart will burst."

"And the downside?"

"I don't know what *downside* means, but you used your body—your life—and agreed to a contract. Naturally, you would lose your life if you violated it," the

man said matter-of-factly. Masamichi swallowed before confirming his fears.

“Um...the contract. It was that I would be your servant, right?”

“So you remember that much. Fine. As your master, I have provided you with clothes. Put them on and come downstairs.”

“Clothes?”

“Your old clothes were so miserable that I threw them away while ripping them off.”

“You...ripped them off?”

The man lifted his chin a few centimeters haughtily, as if what he’d done was the obvious course of action.

“How could I mend that body otherwise? Or did you want me to do it sloppily without being fully prepared?”

“Not at all!”

The situation between Masamichi and the man was very unusual, but when the man did—or rather, said—something, he made everything sound perfectly normal, which made things worse.

*But considering the mess my body was, my clothes must have also been in terrible shape.*

Masamichi slowly took his hand off his knees and checked the paper bag. Inside were tightly packed bags of clothes, still in their wrapping.

A little startled, he looked up at the man’s frowning face.

“Did you buy these for me?”

“Your fingers and toes would never see the sun if you tried to wear my clothes.”

Masamichi was at a loss for words.

It was true that compared with his compact height at about 160 centimeters, the man in front of him was well proportioned and surely over 180 centimeters.

“Oh, and if you want to use the shower before you get dressed, the bathroom

is by the stairs. I'm sure I've drunk and licked up all the blood you've spilled, so you shouldn't have any stains left."

The man grinned with satisfaction as if remembering the taste of Masamichi's blood.

"Eep!"

*I knew it... I knew it. But geez, he licked the blood off me!!*

Masamichi's face went red with shame as he inadvertently remembered the man's bloody face devouring his leg. Masamichi also couldn't help but imagine the man licking his naked body with that red tongue.

The man raised an eyebrow at this reaction and said with astonishment, "If you're that energetic, you should be okay. Now get ready and come downstairs."

He had turned before even finishing his instructions and disappeared out the door by the time Masamichi started to respond.

Stunned, Masamichi listened to the sound of the man's footsteps as he briskly stomped down the stairs.

"Give me a break... What is with that man? What's going to happen to me?"

Masamichi was dumbstruck, and there was no one to answer him.

At any rate, he'd learned that the man was impatient.

He would surely be irritated if Masamichi didn't promptly get dressed and go downstairs as instructed.

"If I'm his servant, then it means that person—though I don't know who he is or even his name—is *my master*. That would probably make him more important to me than the pub manager."

Masamichi established this pecking order in his mind and nodded slightly.

It was a bad idea to offend his master, who was higher in rank than the pub manager. He had gotten on the pub manager's nerves—and look what had happened.

Especially now, when he knew nothing about the man's background, he

wanted to make things as smooth as possible.

*But...did he really lick off all my blood?*

He wanted to believe that was an exaggeration, but the fact was that there wasn't a speck of blood anywhere on his body.

*I wonder if that beautiful man did something so perverted...though it won't help to think about it!*

Masamichi felt numb from the constant surprises and wasn't even disgusted that a man had licked his body. He was embarrassed, and putting on the clothes he'd been given was difficult.

"Okay, I'll shower, then gratefully put on the clothes he bought me, and we'll go from there."

He was alive. That was certain. It was also certain that the man had saved him.

First, he needed to get ready, then go and thank him.

*This is no time to hesitate because I'm shy. Come on, I can do it.*

Masamichi slapped his cheeks for a little boost, grabbed the paper bag, and got off the bed.

Groaning at his aching muscles, he promptly headed to the bathroom.

Once he was dressed in his new clothes and feeling refreshed, Masamichi stepped out of the bathroom and caught a whiff of something that smelled good.

No matter where he looked, this was an old house. Maybe someone was cooking downstairs, and the exhaust from the ventilation fan had come upstairs.

*Someone's grilling fish!*

Masamichi's stomach growled as soon as he recognized the smell.

Come to think of it, the man had casually mentioned that Masamichi had

slept for three days.

The young man had neither eaten nor had anything to drink during that time, so it was natural that his body would complain.

*I know it's brazen to wonder this, but would they have some...for me, too? I hope they do.*

Masamichi walked down the stairs, praying that would be the case.

The stairs curved sharply at a small triangular landing and were pretty steep with narrow treads. There was a handrail, but he could fall if he wasn't careful.

Masamichi was surprised again when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

He was looking at a tea room.

It was a room for holding Japanese tea ceremonies, about ten tatami mats in size, and was furnished with a tea chest, a low table, and plump cushions. A folding writing desk was propped up against the wall, probably used for desk work.

Interestingly, it was a typical room from the Showa era but with a modern LCD television.

At the far end of the tea room, there was a low cupboard and an old-fashioned kitchen beyond it, where the mysterious man was cooking.

*I thought his wife or someone was cooking, but it's him. I wonder if he lives alone. Still...*

What drew Masamichi's attention the most was the spacious earthen floor, separated from the tea room by an old-fashioned roll curtain—an elegant bamboo screen.

At least, Masamichi thought it was an earthen floor since it was a step lower than the tea ceremony room.

In the center of the large space was a passageway leading to a door that looked like an entrance; both sides of this passageway were filled with old and worn-out tools piled up almost as high as the ceiling.

*Is this a garbage dump? No, people don't set up garbage dumps inside their*

*homes. But what on earth is it? I thought the man was a mystery, but this place is just as impossible to figure out.*

Some items were household tools, while others were dolls, musical instruments, and even masks. The dim light made it hard to identify them, but the square objects must have been frames for paintings.

He thought they were all antiques, but then he glimpsed a toy weapon from a recent TV show about a hero and villains. The assortment was so varied that it offered no clue of a particular taste or style.

“Don’t just stand there. Get to work.”

Masamichi turned around, startled by the man’s voice behind him.

“On what?”

“Breakfast.”

The man spoke to him from the kitchen, not even bothering to turn around. Masamichi made his way around the cupboard and approached him.

A large wooden tray on a rugged stainless steel cooktop bore neatly placed plates of food.

“Oh, that smell. It’s roasted salmon. Yum.”

“Never mind that, just take the plates to the table,” the man said with a scoff.

It seemed they would be eating at the low table in the tea room. Masamichi held the tray with both hands and carried it to the dining table, ignoring his body aches, which had not faded at all.

There was salted salmon with golden-brown skin, freshly cooked rice that gleamed, greens simmered in broth, and eggplant miso soup.

Masamichi was arranging the dishes, all the while thinking it looked like breakfast at a Japanese inn, when the man came over with a small iron kettle in one hand.

The man sat on a cushion, opened the kettle lid, took a teapot and a teacup from inside the chest, and began making tea.

*It’s getting to be more and more like an inn!*



Masamichi had finished setting the table and was impressed. He sat on his knees next to the table, placing both hands on the tatami mat, and bowed his head so deep that his forehead almost touched the mat.

“Thank you for saving my life. And thank you for this outfit. I’ve never worn such high-quality clothing before.”

He wasn’t trying to flatter the man or be humble.

The clothes Masamichi had taken out of the paper bag after much hesitation were a very casual pair of beige chinos and a navy-blue cotton sweater, but they were luxury-brand goods that he only knew by name. They must have cost several hundred dollars each.

As the man scooped tea leaves into a teapot with a spoon and poured hot water from the iron kettle, he responded as if it was nothing.

“A servant’s attire is like a mirror reflecting the dignity of his master. I will not allow you to wear anything shabby.”

The man used words like *servant* and *master*, which were rarely heard in modern society, so casually. Masamichi still had his head bowed and continued, “And even food. Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for me. I don’t know how I can ever repay you...”

It was a typical expression of gratitude, but the man snickered like he was bored.

“It isn’t something you could ever repay.”

“That’s...true, but...um, I was very confused right after the accident—I was dying, and my mind was probably fuzzy.”

Masamichi didn’t see the end of the man’s eyebrow twitch.

“You! Are you trying to annul our contract...?”

“I’m not! That isn’t it. This contract... Well, I’ve remembered the deal we made.”

Masamichi bowed his head and spoke honestly to the man, who was staring at him hard.

“But my memory is a little hazy about what I’m supposed to do as your servant.”

The man then said with a grim look on his face, “I told you to work for me and be my food. A servant is controlled by his master. Since we agreed to our contract, your body and soul—every part of you—belongs to me.”

“...Everything.”

“Yes. Obey my orders. Improve yourself so you can satisfy me. Simply put, that is your duty as my servant,” the man said bluntly as he poured two cups of tea. “The food will get cold. Eat.”

Masamichi supposed that was another order from his master.

With resignation, he obediently replied, “Yes, sir,” and sat on the cushion facing the man. “Thank you for preparing this meal,” he said politely, but the man had begun his own meal without a word.

After all, the man was also an impatient eater.

He was not taking large mouthfuls or raking his food in, but his chopsticks were moving unusually fast. He expertly used his chopsticks to break up the salmon and removed the bones with great precision and elegance.

Impressed, Masamichi broke a piece off his own salmon slice and put it on rice.

He took a bite and exclaimed innocently like a child, “Delicious!”

The salmon was grilled just right. The skin, meat, and surface were nice and crispy, with the perfect amount of salt and fat.

The greens were a vegetable Masamichi didn’t recognize. The stems and leaves were flat and pale green in color. It was surprisingly tender and tasty and was soaked in a light broth.

The miso soup contained grilled eggplant peeled and cut into large pieces, and its simplicity was elegant. The fragrant aroma of the grilled eggplant seemed to enhance the sweetness of the white miso.

Masamichi’s appreciation of the meal wasn’t only because he hadn’t eaten in a while. It was also the quality of the ingredients and the skill with which the

dishes had been prepared.

Realizing he had been wolfing down the food, Masamichi put down his chopsticks and drank the *hojicha*—roasted green tea—the man had brewed to calm his nerves.

With the painstaking care the man had taken to make the tea, Masamichi had expected it to taste great. But he took one sip and let a “Huh?” escape him.

“What’s the matter?”

The man looked at Masamichi suspiciously and methodically ate his meal.

“Oh...um, uh...,” Masamichi stammered, thinking that telling him what he thought of the tea would be rude.

Then the man said, “It is inexcusable to conceal something from your master. From now on, tell me anything and everything. Do not hide anything from me.”

“B-but...but—but—but...some things are rude to say, and you might get mad.”

“I’ll decide whether I get mad. Now, what is this about the tea?”

This man had saved his life, so Masamichi had to answer honestly. He said slowly:

“The tea seems to taste different from the *hojicha* that I know. It tastes... Well, I’m sorry, but it smells...burnt.”

Masamichi shrugged, expecting a reprimand.

But the man agreed nonchalantly.

“I guess it does.”

“Huh?!”

“This is *Kyo-bancha*, Kyoto-style green tea.”

“K-Kyoto style?”

“It’s a coarse green tea the locals have been drinking for ages, also called *iri-bancha*. This is the result when the tea leaves are dried and roasted without rubbing.”

“Wow!”

Masamichi was dazzled to learn the name of a tea he hadn't known and its production method. The man's lips curved slightly upward in a faint smile.

"The first time I tried it, I thought it was stupid to drink something that smelled like fallen leaves, but once you get used to it, it's delicious. The previous owner and his wife loved to drink it."

Masamichi was slightly surprised by the warmth in the man's soft expression and words.

"The previous owner and his wife? Oh, was this place a store?"

The man took a sip of his tea before answering in a whisper, "Bougyoudou."

"...Sorry, what was that?"

"*Bougyoudou* was the name of the shop. It means *forgetting the dawn*. The previous owner named it that when he opened his business as an expression of his desire to forget the deepening of the night and speak with customers like friends. People are strange, wanting to talk when they become close."

"That's a wonderful name for a store."

Masamichi meant that from the bottom of his heart. As someone who wasn't good at socializing and had never conversed with anyone in such a carefree manner, the previous owner's desire seemed very dazzling.

Nevertheless, the mystery of the man's backstory deepened yet again, and Masamichi had no idea what to start asking.

"So, uh, this Bougyoudou. What kind of store was it? Did they sell the junk...I mean, the items you have over there?"

"Did you say *junk*?"

"Oh, no! Never!"

The mild look in the man's eyes became razor-sharp like a sword again. Panicked, Masamichi shook his head vigorously.

"Watch what you say. Every item you see here has a soul. Be rude, and you will be duly punished."

"Those items have souls? You mean like 'There's a god in every grain of rice'?"

Granny—I mean, my grandmother often said that when she told me to finish all my rice.”

Resigned, the man shook his head.

“Most gods are the product of the human mind. If you say there is a god in every grain of rice, humans must have placed them there.”

Masamichi couldn’t understand much of what the man had said, and unable to respond, he just closed his mouth and looked troubled.

Paying him no mind, the man picked up his chopsticks again.

“The previous owner was an antique dealer who operated a used-goods store. Now that I’ve taken over the establishment, I guess it means I’m engaged in a similar business.”

“So you’re an antique dealer? I see. Um, so...”

Masamichi had a rough idea of the man’s occupation, so he straightened and boldly broached a fundamental topic.

“I know it’s a little late now when we’ve already established that you’re the master and I’m your servant, but my name is Masamichi Adachi.”

The man neatly finished his rice and said in a bored tone, “I know who you are. You told me your name when we agreed to our contract.”

“Oh, that’s right, I did! But I don’t know your name.”

“Now that you mention it, I guess you don’t. Names and such don’t have much meaning to me, but...it’s Shino.”

Masamichi tilted his head in surprise. It sounded like a woman’s name.

“Is that your first name? Oh, perhaps it’s your last name.”

“*Tatsumi* is my surname. My master named me *Shino*. *Tatsumi* was also my master’s name, which I use for convenience.”

“...Wait a minute, please.”

Masamichi—unable to bear this new, big mystery when he was just beginning to learn more about Shino’s identity—held up his right palm toward his master.

Shino saw that as a rude gesture, and a frown appeared on his elegant face.

“What do you mean, ‘Wait a minute,’ when I have gone to the trouble of answering your question?”

“I’m truly sorry. But I’m super confused.”

“What is there to be confused about?”

“Mr. Tatsumi, you—”

“Call me Shino. As I said, *Tatsumi* was my master’s surname, which I’m only borrowing.”

“That’s what I mean! So, Mr. Shino—”

“I said *Shino* is fine.”

Annoyed, Masamichi protested:

“Are you kidding?! I’m younger than you, and you’re...my master, right? I would think I’d need to address you with an honorific.”

Shino wasn’t backing down, either. He quickly retorted with a miffed look on his face. “No need for honorifics, and don’t sound so formal. That requires too many words, and it annoys me.”

“No way I can do that...”

“What do you mean, ‘no way’? I don’t like people beating around the bush. Speak your thoughts honestly in short sentences. I talked to my master like I’m talking to you now.”

“That’s what I wanted to ask!”

“...Huh?”

“Your master!”

Masamichi was so stunned that *his master* previously had a master that the young man forgot that he was introverted and bad at communicating with people. Leaning forward slightly, he asked:

“The person who owned this place before... Wasn’t he your master?”

“No. Haven’t you been listening to me? It appears I’ve gotten myself a fool of

a servant. The previous owner was just a human being who owned this store. My master took control of me in the past. He's a nasty man who has been long dead but continues to bind me with his curse."

"...A curse?"

"A curse, a spell. Voodoo. You humans call it things like that, but they all have the same roots."

"A curse... Mr. Shino, someone put a curse on you?"

Shino glared at Masamichi, and the young man corrected himself with a hesitant mumble.

"I—I mean Shino..."

Masamichi had never even spoken casually with people his age. Here he was with *his master*, though he still didn't fully understand what that meant. Regardless, he couldn't chat so informally with his master, a man who was older than him.

Shino seemed satisfied with that and nodded.

"Yeah, someone put a curse on me. I wouldn't be here playing antique dealer if he hadn't. He was abominable. I thought I would be freed when his death broke the spell, but I was wrong."

"Um, hold on a sec... Wait."

Masamichi pushed his fingers against his temples, desperately trying to sort through the information he had just been given.

"So you're my master and had a master yourself."

"Mm-hmm."

"Your master is dead, but he continues to curse you, even after death. And that's inconveniencing you... Is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand."

"I know what you're saying, but my brain can't digest it. But before we get into that..." Masamichi removed his fingers from his head and set them on his thighs. Pushing back the fear and uncertainty forming vaguely in his mind, he

softly asked, “Shino...who *are* you?”

“You’re asking me who I am?” Shino responded as Masamichi pointed at him. “I thought you had figured it out by now. You said it yourself.”

“Huh? Did I...say something?”

After drinking his miso soup and finishing his breakfast, Shino quoted him matter-of-factly, “‘No way could a human being fix it like this.’ That’s what you said.”

“Oh!”

Masamichi gulped.

*I did say that! I couldn’t believe any human being could “fix” my body when it was battered and I was dying. But...*

“Come to think of it, you said something like that, too: ‘How could a mere human do something like that?’ But... No, it couldn’t be. No matter how I look at you, you’re a regular person.”

“If that’s supposed to be a compliment, you must be punished.”

“Huh?!”

Seeing the grumpy look on Shino’s face and hearing his frightening words, Masamichi put a hand on the tatami mat and tried to back away.

Shino sat in the same calm manner as when he had spoken about tea and said:

“I am a specter.”

“...I beg your pardon?”

“A spirit, a monster, a demon... People complicate the matter with too many words to describe us, but put simply, there are beings that are beyond this world, and I’m one of them—though I am certainly the cream of the crop.”

“A spirit... A monster.”

“Yeah.”

“You aren’t human?”



“That’s what I’m saying.”

Masamichi fell speechless.

*He’s dangerous. I would normally run, but this person—Er, he says he isn’t human, but I’ll call him a person for convenience.*

Despite his confusion, Masamichi desperately tried to think straight.

*This person saved my life. That’s a fact. I still don’t know what he’ll make me do as his servant, but he’s given me a bed to sleep in and fed me. It’s scary, but he’s nice, no matter how I look at this.*

Shino’s blunt words and actions frightened him, but when Masamichi considered all the man had done for him, he felt indebted.

If he looked at things that way, his fear lessened.

“You might get mad at me again, but you’re human, no matter how I look at you.” He worked up the courage and said it. Shino clicked his tongue again.

But Masamichi thought Shino was mad at his late master, not him.

And he seemed to be correct.

Shino tried to explain, albeit grimly.

“Long ago, I was a specter that ate humans.”

This time, Masamichi put his head in his hands. “That’s an even more disturbing story about the past...!”

“What is with you? Stop interrupting!”

“Sorry! When was this?”

“About a thousand years ago. You people call it the Heian period.”

“...The Heian period.”

Masamichi learned that when people were overwhelmed with too many surprises, their emotions went haywire, and they became numb. He calmly asked Shino, “You ate people during the Heian period? Like you ate my leg? That really happened, didn’t it?”

Shino nodded like it was the most natural thing to have done.

“Yeah. Back then, a crack had occurred in the boundary between our worlds, and I slipped in. I grabbed people, tore them apart, and ate them randomly.”

“I don’t know how to respond when you talk about it so matter-of-factly.”

“Then don’t. Just listen,” Shino said casually and continued to tell Masamichi about other memories that made his skin crawl.

“Abe no Seimei was quite the formidable spiritual medium, but after his death, there were no other *onmyouji*—masters of yin and yang—who could control me. I suppose I was naive to think that. A man captured me. He wasn’t much of a master of divination, but he was cunning and vindictive like a snake.”

“Was that your master? The second man?”

“Correct.”

Shino’s mouth twisted disapprovingly.

“I assumed he would kill me, but that man... In a fit of madness, Tokifuyu Tatsumi convinced his fellow masters that I was a powerful specter he could use in his practices. He said they could utilize me as a servant to protect the capital, and it was wiser to make me pay for my sins for a long time rather than kill me.”

“And he made you his servant?”

“Correct. They referred to specters and deities they used as their servants as *shikigami*, or *shiki*.”

“Oh, so this Tokifuyu...”

“Tatsumi.”

“Tokifuyu Tatsumi became your master.”

Shino turned his vacant gaze to the sky as if looking somewhere far away.

“That was when Tokifuyu named me Shino and cast a spell on me.”

“What...kind of spell?”

“He took away a large part of my power and locked my soul in this human body. I could turn myself into any being before, but if I weaken in this state, I will become invisible with no physical form. Even after regaining some power, I can only return to this body that Tokifuyu created for me.”

Masamichi stared as Shino spread his arms and showed him his body.

Even when the hit-and-run had left him near death and with deteriorating vision, Masamichi had recognized that Shino's beauty was out of this world.

He had an oval-shaped face with symmetrical features. The hair that framed his face was slightly wavy and came down to his ears.

The face was modern and beautiful, but it was nothing like the round and puffy ones of the aristocrats in picture scrolls from the Heian period.

"You have a modern face," Masamichi said. "Your master gave you that face and body during the Heian period, right?"

"He didn't give it to me. He forced it upon me," Shino corrected, roughly rubbing his cheek with one hand. "He said a round and happy face didn't suit me and that he would give me a fierce, thoughtful face and a large body."

"A fierce, thoughtful face, huh? And yeah, you would have been big during the Heian period."

Shino nodded grimly.

"Because of that, I often bumped my forehead into things. Everything Tokifuyu said and did annoyed me."

"Was there a reason he gave you a big body?" Masamichi asked curiously.

Shino answered grumpily, "He said it was convenient when he had me pull kimonos off the top shelves, and that it would surely be an asset when picking persimmons from the tree in the garden."

"Pfft!"

Masamichi couldn't help laughing, and Shino narrowed his eyes.

"You dare laugh at your master?!"

"S-sorry. But I didn't expect something like that... It's cu..."

*Cute!*

Masamichi swallowed the word before it came out of his mouth. Shino would be furious if he said it was cute.

Covering his mouth with one hand and suppressing his chuckle, Masamichi wondered:

*I can't remember when I last laughed or talked to someone like this.*

He was a guy who had trouble opening up to others. But here he was, talking naturally and laughing with a man who claimed to be a specter.

Masamichi was stunned to realize that, when Shino, who was still slightly annoyed, added, "One other thing. I was also strictly forbidden from capturing live humans and eating them. Disobey that rule, and my soul would immediately disappear."

"Huh? That doesn't make sense."

The question that popped into Masamichi's mind conveniently stopped his laughing fit, and he looked straight at Shino and made his point.

"You munched away at my leg when we first met!"

Shino grinned and licked his lips with the tip of his tongue as if recalling the taste of Masamichi's flesh and blood, making the young man shiver.

"Yes, I did. But I didn't capture you. That leg wasn't attached to your body. All I did was pick it up off the ground and eat it."

"Isn't that nitpicking?!"

"That's what spells are like. One may believe it's perfect, but somewhere, sometime, there is bound to be a loophole. And thanks to that loophole, I enjoyed tasty flesh and blood for the first time in a thousand years."

"Okay, hold on again. Did you say I would be food for you?"

"I certainly did. That's one of a servant's responsibilities to his master."

Masamichi couldn't believe it. He stared at the partially eaten salmon on the table before him.

"Are you saying you plan to pull off bits and pieces of my body and eat them like we're eating this delicious meal? But my body is whole now. You can't capture me and eat me, right?"

Shino's eyes changed as soon as he saw Masamichi's fear.

Their lightly pigmented, brownish luminescence became a catlike golden color, and the round pupils turned into long, thin, vertical lines.

“...!”

“So I won’t capture you,” Shino said in a singsong voice as the corners of his lips curved upward.

“Huh...?”

“You are my servant. I don’t need to capture you; you must do as I say. You must gladly offer me any part of you, be it an arm or a leg, if I order you to do so.”

“B-but...”

“Do you want to run away? Do that, and the blood gushing from your exploding heart will splatter the old items in this place before you take three steps.”

Suddenly, Shino’s true demonic nature was peeking out from behind his human facade, and Masamichi stiffened like a frog at the mercy of a snake, unable to blink.

But it turned out that Shino was only kidding.

He quickly changed his eyes back to those of a human, chuckled, and said, “But if I tear off your limbs and eat them, I would be left with a lot of work to do.”

“...Huh?! ”

“I thought it would be easier to mend a human body, but it was quite a challenge,” Shino said, staring up and down Masamichi’s body as if to get revenge on Masamichi for laughing at him. “I had a hard time putting that right leg back in place after I got greedy and nibbled on it. I had to use up all the power I’d gained by feeding on your flesh and blood. It isn’t worth it.”

Masamichi shook his head and breathed a long sigh of relief.

“I never expected you to talk about the cost-effectiveness of eating me. So anyway, you’ve scrapped the idea of pulling off my arms and legs and making a meal of them, right?”

“Yes, but if I don’t have to put them back in place...”

“Please do that. Or rather, give up on the idea. But then what part of me are you planning to eat?”

“I’ll think about it. For now, you should eat properly and get back in shape.”

Masamichi examined the palms of his hands.

“I’m already back in shape. You fixed me.”

Shino shook his head.

“Not completely. All I did was use my power to enhance your physical ability to regenerate and fill in what I thought was missing.”

“What you thought was missing?!”

No wonder Shino had overlooked his birthmark. Masamichi was oddly convinced.

“There will still be areas that aren’t fully healed and body tissue that isn’t completely connected. That is beyond my responsibility. You fix things like that on your own.”

*That’s why my body still hurts all over. It’s been telling me that I haven’t fully recovered yet.*

Masamichi bent and stretched the fingers of both hands a little awkwardly, but Shino told him not to mind that and eat.

Then Shino asked, “And did you have...a nesting place?”

Masamichi set his chopsticks on the table again and nodded.

“A nesting place... Yeah, I live in an apartment.”

Shino responded by giving him an order in a very masterly manner.

“Then go and move out immediately.”

“Huh?!”

Shino pointed at the top of his head.

“It’s natural for you to live with your master if you’re a servant. I’ll give you the room you were sleeping in earlier. Use it as you like. But there is no room

for your things. Go and throw away your belongings.”

“I’m going to live here? With you? Um, who else—?”

“There’s no one else. It’s just you and me.”

“I...see.”

“All right then, hurry up and get it done. As a servant, you should not question any order I give you.”

Not long after he started to relax, Shino’s innate impatience kicked in, and he began getting frustrated again.

“Yes, sir!! I mean, okay!”

Masamichi hurried to fill his mouth with the rest of the salted salmon, which had sadly gotten completely cold but still tasted excellent with the rice...

## CHAPTER 3

### A New Normal

“Oh, you already moved out all your things!”

Masamichi, who had been wiping a window clean, was startled by the high-pitched voice and spun around.

The caretaker’s wife must have let herself in since he’d left the front door open. They were in the apartment Masamichi had been staying in for a year.

Masamichi lived on the second floor, and the caretakers lived on the ground level, watching the tenants with an eagle eye.

It was a bit of a reign of terror since the couple was always the first to rush to the scene when someone made a loud noise in the middle of the night, but them running such a tight ship made it a great place for Masamichi to study.

They weren’t official landlords. The wife’s relative owned the apartment building, and Masamichi had heard that the husband managed the apartment in exchange for free housing.

They were familiar faces since Masamichi saw them once a month when either the husband or wife came to collect the rent.

“Oh, hello,” he said in greeting.

“Hello.”

The woman looked to be in her late forties or early fifties. Clad in her favorite sweat suit, she walked over to Masamichi, showing exasperation since she thought they were close enough to banter.

“What have you done?”

“Huh?!”

Her question startled Masamichi, who still holding the cleaning rag. Then the



caretaker pivoted to gesture around the six-mat room.

“You suddenly informed us just before noon yesterday that you’re moving out. And a day later, you’ve cleaned out your apartment.

“You’re almost as fast as someone running off in the dark of night,” she said under her breath, her round face full of curiosity.

Masamichi struggled to find the words to respond to her.

“Oh...um.”

It wasn’t as if he could reveal what had happened to someone he only greeted in passing and exchanged a few words with when he paid his rent.

He was mulling over what was okay to tell her, when she anxiously changed the topic.

“It’s amazing how you’ve cleaned out the place. Did you sell your belongings in advance?”

Masamichi vaguely denied it. “No, but...there’s an app for selling things.”

That made sense to her, as she nodded several times.

“Yes, that! I know what you’re talking about, and it must be convenient. Your furniture must have been in good shape since you’ve only lived here for a year. Yes, you could certainly get rid of everything right away.”

Masamichi gave a light nod in place of saying, “Exactly.”

Not that he had had much to begin with. You could only put so much furniture in a six-tatami-mat room.

He’d had a small refrigerator, two resin wardrobe cases, a small folding table, a floor chair, cardboard boxes he used as makeshift bookshelves, a stick vacuum cleaner, and a mattress. That was about it.

After Shino told him to move out of his apartment and stay with him, Masamichi immediately went home, told the caretakers he was leaving, and started cleaning the place.

Worried about whether he could find takers for his furniture, Masamichi registered on an app for residents to buy and sell items and was surprised at

how quickly the responses came in.

Thinking about it now, Masamichi guessed the man who had come in a small truck was probably a secondhand dealer.

The man had quickly sorted through the items, pleased to see that they were all still good as new, and told Masamichi that he would take anything else he was having trouble getting rid of while he was at it.

The man did not give Masamichi time to sort the items he didn't need. The man stuffed everything in a large bag he had brought, left a little money, and took off like a gust of wind.

He took the curtains, drying ropes, cooking utensils, and even the towels, clothes, and trash cans Masamichi had packed up for discarding, leaving the room empty as the young man stood there, dumbfounded.

"You always kept your apartment clean and looked tidy, and I could tell you cared for things. I was going to offer to take anything you didn't need, but someone beat me to it. I guess we all think the same way," the caretaker lady said, not even trying to hide her ulterior motive. She suddenly closed the distance between them and stared at his face. "What happened to your face? Tell me honestly. I don't want the wrong kind of people coming to the apartment after you move out."

They were suddenly back on that subject, and she was still suspicious, so Masamichi quickly shook his head.

It was his bad habit, being unable to speak when panicked.

Because of that, Masamichi had been falsely accused of things that could have been avoided if he had explained things properly. He had been misunderstood and suffered for it.

"U-um."

Seeing that Masamichi was unusually agitated, the woman became increasingly suspicious.

"What is it? Is it something you can't tell me? Don't tell me the police are after you..."

“My college entrance exam. I failed!”

On this occasion, his desperate words helped.

She instantly looked convinced and, rather apologetically, patted Masamichi on the arm with her plump hand.

“Oh dear. They didn’t accept you? How many tries has it been?”

“This was my second.”

“Oh, okay, I get it. That’s why you’re moving out and going home to your parents. You poor thing.”

That wasn’t the case, but her misunderstanding was a godsend to get out of this conversation. Masamichi nodded and said, “Thank you for everything,” the same greeting he had uttered the previous day.

The caretaker now looked relieved and waved a hand with a friendly smile.

“Think nothing of it. You’re gloomy and keep to yourself, and when you first arrived, I thought, *Here’s a young man with no energy who has come to live in our building*. But I was grateful to learn that you were quiet and clean. Plus, you always paid the rent on time.”

Criticized and praised simultaneously, Masamichi didn’t know how to react and could only give the woman a smile.

Ignoring Masamichi, who could not even speak, the caretaker went around the room and inspected it.

“If I had a choice, I would have preferred Aoki in room 204 moving out. Do you know he’s always hanging some weird grass from the ceiling to dry, and there’s an unpleasantly sweet smell coming from his place? I figure it’s a failed case of homemade pickles.”

Masamichi wasn’t interested in hearing it, but the caretaker went on and on about the tenant’s personal information as she checked the unit he had vacated. Then she returned to him, still chattering away.

“I’m glad you left everything cleaner than before you moved in. This is the time of year when kids come here from all parts of the country to go to college, and they’re looking for rooms, so they fill up fast. We’ve had several inquiries

today. In this state, they could move right... Oops, sorry, I'm blabbing!"

She laughed sheepishly, realizing her blunder, then slapped Masamichi on the arm.

"...It doesn't bother me," he said but looked annoyed. Still, he gave her back the room key and told her he'd leave as soon as he finished cleaning the place.

The previous day, he had given her a parting gift—a box of sweets—when he said he was moving out, and the caretaker smiled at him.

"Listen, if you have any small bags of garbage, you can bring them to me, and I'll take them out for you," she said. In her book, it was probably the greatest extra service she could offer.

"...Phew."

Masamichi finally exhaled in relief a few seconds after the door closed behind the caretaker. He went to the middle of the room and sat cross-legged.

*There was nothing here when I first arrived last spring. I've done nothing but study and work this past year, but I was accumulating things little by little, and it was finally starting to feel like home to me. Now I'm back at square one.*

He lay down on his back and got a whiff of the distinctive smell of old tatami mats. This was one of the things he couldn't eliminate, no matter how many times he wiped the mat clean.

*To reset.*

The words suddenly popped into his mind.

He'd felt the need to reset his plans after failing to get into college, but what had happened was more primal. His life had been reset.

Only five days ago, he had been hit by a car and almost...no, mostly died.

He felt dizzy just thinking about the turbulent turn of events that had occurred since.

*Though, I slept for three of those days. It's incredible realizing how much my situation has changed in the two days I've been awake.*

As he raised his hands and held them in front of his face, the bright early

spring light streaming in through the window made the silhouette of his palms appear red.

This red was the color of blood flowing under his skin.

Blood flowed evenly throughout his body, all the way to the ends. He was alive.

That obvious fact was still hard for Masamichi to believe after being pulled back from the brink of death through an astonishing process.

He clenched his fists, opened them, and felt a slight pain. Nevertheless, it was much better than when he'd woken up the day before. The same went for the rest of his body.

His recovery made it possible to come to the apartment and tidy up his room. He could dust, wipe, and clean without a hitch.

"But it all seems a little weird."

Masamichi looked at his hands and mumbled to himself with puzzlement.

Since awakening the day before, his fingers had felt strange. It was hard to describe, but every time he used his hands to do something, his brain complained that the sensation differed from what he'd thought it would be.

It would be like playing an out-of-tune guitar, if he compared it to a musical instrument.

When Masamichi hesitantly mentioned it to Shino, the older man had said without delay, *"Oh, I considered how your body was balanced and thought it would be better if your fingers were a little longer, so I extended them a bit for you."*

Masamichi thought he was joking, but Shino looked serious.

Having heard that, it was the only plausible reason for the strange feeling with his fingers.

When he tried to pick up an object, his fingertips hit the item a moment earlier than expected, and when he buttoned his shirt, his fingers felt too long. On top of that, he was suddenly bad at using chopsticks, and he was also finding it hard to hold a pen.

He would have complained to Shino for doing this to him without his permission, but the man—or demon—had saved his life and become Masamichi's master by contract.

What's more...

"I hate to admit this, but everything looks better."

Masamichi stared at his hands, his mouth agape.

To borrow Shino's words, *the specter* had *fixed* every part of Masamichi's body for him.

Unbeknownst to Masamichi, his body had been remade into something a little different than the one he'd had since birth, and he still had mixed feelings about it.

Though everything was in his own heart, he wasn't sure if it was anger, confusion, or loneliness. Perhaps it was a mixture of all those emotions.

The only certainty was that he would have to live the rest of his life in this newly fixed body.

*But I feel bad that I don't have the pork-cutlet birthmark on my leg that Mom loved...since Shino ate it.*

The small birthmark that Masamichi had always had before on his right calf was completely unnecessary. It was even better not to have it, as birthmarks sometimes became malignant.

Masamichi had no intention of complaining about it to Shino.

But he missed it now that it was gone and felt sad and lonely.

*That pork cutlet... I should think of it as having died in my place.*

He was pondering this when his phone, which was by the window, suddenly rang.

At this apartment, where the walls were too thin, tenants were always supposed to have their phones on silent mode.

It would be embarrassing to be scolded after canceling his contract, so Masamichi jumped up, ran to the window, and pressed the call button on his

phone.

*“Masamichi? Hey, your mom told me. So you didn’t pass your college entrance exam.”*

Masamichi had panicked and hit answer without checking the caller ID. It was his father, whom he hadn’t talked to in a long time.

*I would have expected a call from Mom since I was thinking of her, but it’s Dad!*

Masamichi opened his mouth to speak as he told his heart to settle down.

“Oh yeah. Sorry about the trouble I’ve caused.”

“No problem,” his dad said in a relaxed tone, as had his mom. He probably meant, “Don’t worry about it.”

Like Masamichi, his dad didn’t talk much, and Masamichi didn’t recall having many conversations with him when he lived at home. Masamichi was surprised to hear him speak so warmly, and then something occurred to him.

*Oh yeah, I have to tell him I’m moving. But how?*

“I was almost killed in a hit-and-run accident, but a demon saved me after I agreed to be his servant. He will provide me with food, clothing, and shelter!” If Masamichi told him that truth, his mom would probably fly out there before the end of the day, worried about her son’s mental state.

*I’ll explain it so it doesn’t sound suspicious...but I don’t want to lie outright.*

Masamichi was confused as to how to go about doing this, but he couldn’t continue responding vaguely to his father’s words.

He began with the story of how he was almost run over by a car but was saved by a kind man passing by.

When telling a lie, the trick was to mix in a little truth, as a detective once said in a novel he read. He did not consciously set out to do so, but he didn’t want to worry his family too much, and as a result, a subtle mixture of truth and falsehood came naturally to him.

*“What’s going on with you?”*

Masamichi's heart beat faster as he heard his dad express his surprise, and he continued to speak a little too quickly.

"I'm not particularly, uh, injured right now! Oh, and this kind man? He's an antique dealer or antique tool dealer or something like that, and, um, he's going to let me stay at his house as a servant...I mean, a helper."

Telling himself that it wasn't a lie, Masamichi gave his father the address of Bougyoudou, where Shino worked and lived.

Dad said it was great that Masamichi had been blessed with the opportunity to help this man and said, *"Work hard there and be useful, and you can take your time thinking about your future."*

"I'll text you. Give my regards to Mom and Granddad."

*"Call us once in a while. Grandpa can't read the small print,"* he said softly, and the call ended.

"Huh...I somehow managed that. I can't tell anyone the truth. They'd never believe me, and besides..."

Masamichi looked out the window, which was bare now because the curtains had been taken away.

There was not much of a view. He could only see the elderly neighbors talking in the narrow alley before him.

*As Shino said that night, no matter how I look at it, I can only benefit by being a servant,* Masamichi thought as he gazed out at the clear sky.

It would have been like being forced into slavery if Shino had *coerced* him into becoming his servant, but the reality was the exact opposite.

Masamichi would be living in a small room in an old house, but it was a private space, and he could wash his clothes and bathe without having to go to a laundromat or public bathhouse.

Shino had bought him enough clothes for the next few days and fed him three meals daily.

That morning, Shino was out when Masamichi woke up, but he had set bread, butter, and strawberry jam on the table.



Masamichi wasn't living like an enslaved person. His master was treating him with the finest care.

The previous night, Shino had given Masamichi some "pocket money" in the form of an envelope with a few ten-thousand-yen bills shoved inside.

Masamichi tried to decline, but that seemed to agitate Shino, who said, *"Do you see me as a master who can't even care for his servant?"*

Shino had told him to buy whatever personal items he needed, but Masamichi felt bad about it, so the money went untouched.

*I left Shino a note saying I'm off to clean up my apartment. I wonder if he's gotten home by now?*

Masamichi checked his phone and learned it was just after one o'clock in the afternoon.

His body, still in the process of repair, started screaming for nourishment.

"The least I could do is invite him to lunch or something to thank him and use the money I made from selling my furniture instead of the money he gave me. I wonder if that would be presumptuous of me as a servant, though."

With that sudden thought crossing his mind, Masamichi looked at his phone and exclaimed:

"Come to think of it, I don't have Shino's number. I'm sure Bougyoudou must have a landline, but does Shino have a smartphone? I wonder if demons can go out and buy smartphones in the first place?"

Masamichi pondered over the simple question.

Due to his three-day coma, it was only the previous day that he and Shino had begun talking properly. There were still too many things he didn't know about the man.

Shino wasn't all that interested in Masamichi, but Masamichi wanted to learn as much as he could about the person—er, the specter—who had become his master. Besides, he was very interested in Shino.

He had yet to decide how much of Shino's story to believe.

Still, it was the first time he had met someone who claimed to have been living since the Heian period, and the events of that time, which Shino had told him a little about while sounding bored, were as exciting as watching a movie.

*I'd love to hear more about Abe no Seimei, even if it's just a story he made up. And the story of Shino's master. He must have been a fun guy, making Shino tall to fetch things from high places and pick persimmon fruits in his garden.*

On the other hand, Masamichi had already experienced something terrible.

The sharp, golden eyes that Shino had shown him the previous day for just a moment.

Shino's pupils had narrowed vertically, and Masamichi had seen a deep, entangling darkness that seemed to suck him in.

Masamichi had frozen instantly when those eyes stared into his.

Fear and awe had occupied his heart, but now he realized that a strange feeling a little like fascination had been thrown into the mix.

If that was a glimpse of the true nature of demons, what terrifying, fierce, mysterious, and beautiful creatures they were!

"It was scary, but...his eyes were so beautiful and somehow sad."

Remembering Shino's gaze, Masamichi let out a small sigh.

He opened the window, and a slightly chilly but soft spring breeze blew in. The sunlight was warm and glorious.

Masamichi couldn't help but be amazed that he was preoccupied thinking about specters in such fine weather.

*But it's all real, isn't it?*

He had no idea what would happen to him or what he should do, but at any rate, Masamichi had no choice but to somehow adjust to life with Shino.

*I'm well enough to move around now, so I shouldn't let him keep taking care of me. I'll return to the house immediately and do what I can.*

To date, Masamichi had tended to think of things that happened as either bad or worse. Still, now that he had fallen to the point where there was nothing

worse to come, he was feeling unusually open and positive, thinking, *All that remains is to maintain the status quo or go up, whatever I do.*

“With that decided, I’ll hurry up and finish cleaning this place,” Masamichi said to motivate himself, then took out from his bag the cleaner he had brought and began to wipe the last remaining windowpanes...

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An old, small house tucked away in a quiet residential area. It was Bougyoudou, the antique and used-goods store that Shino operated.

The surrounding area was a mixture of dwellings of various sizes, designs, and ages, from grand old homes said to exist since before the war to low-rise apartment buildings that had recently been completed, plus a scattering of small stores.

The town had a calm and relaxed atmosphere and showed that it had changed and matured over a long period.

Masamichi said good-bye to the apartment he had lived in for a year, took the train back to his “new home,” Bougyoudou, and pulled out a key ring from his beloved square, flat backpack.

Since the previous night, a new key had been added to Masamichi’s key ring, which was lined with keys to the front door of his parents’ house and the farm shed. It was the key that Shino had given him to Bougyoudou’s front door.

It was a big brass key. The kind he had only seen in storybooks. Its construction was so simple that one would wonder if it would be enough to prevent today’s crimes, but Shino had said confidently, *“A key is just like a decoration.”*

When Masamichi had been dying, he could barely speak, but Shino had been able to accurately distinguish his voice, which had been weaker than his breathing, and converse with him normally.

A specter’s hearing seemed to be superb. If that was the case, they could detect a burglar faster than any security system.

The dull, dark-gold key had many small scratches on the surface, suggesting it had been used for many years.

Masamichi gingerly inserted the long key into the door's keyhole at Bougyoudou.

He rotated it with more force than a modern key would need and heard the heavy lock turn over.

A clanging sound rang out when he opened the unlocked door. Two Nambu cast-iron tongs were hanging on the inside of the door, and they swung into each other when the door opened and closed.

Despite being the middle of the day, the large earthen mudroom was dimly lit, and sunlight streamed in through two small windows cut high on the wall, the glow creating the illusion of an angel's ladder.

"I'm home," Masamichi said as he stepped into the narrow passageway at the center of the space with the earthen floor.

On both sides of the passageway, miscellaneous goods were packed together so tightly that even Masamichi's slender shoulders brushed them as he went inside.

One could say the items were exquisitely balanced, but it was a wonder that they hadn't collapsed. They had probably just piled up over time as items were randomly placed here and there.

When Masamichi first saw this, he thought it reminded him of something, and he finally knew what that was.

It looked just like when Moses split the sea with his staff, which Masamichi had been shown at a nearby church when he was a child.

*It's also identical to— What was it, that place in Toyama Prefecture? The wall of snow along the Tateyama Kurobe Alpine Route. I've never been there, but it looks like that wall I see on the news every year.*

The height of the steep snow wall contrasted with the sightseeing buses passing by, and the thought made a small dimple appear on Masamichi's soft cheek.

People often said that Masamichi had a childlike face, perhaps due to the gentle roundness of his cheeks and the fact that he never had a single pimple,

even during his adolescent years.

“Mr. Shino... I mean, Shino?”

There was no response from inside the house, and Masamichi called out to Shino again, not yet comfortable with being on a first-name basis, but there was still no response.

“Maybe he isn’t home yet.”

Careful to avoid bumping into the items scattered here and there, Masamichi went down the passageway and stumbled up to the tea room, which was one step higher than the rest.

He could’ve taken a short staircase up to the tea room instead; it was in the corner of the mudroom, behind the desk where the cash register sat. But Masamichi thought it was cool how Shino went back and forth directly from the passage and wanted to imitate him.

Unfortunately, the difference in the lengths of their legs made it impossible for Masamichi to climb up and down as smoothly as Shino. Still, the act brought back fun memories of his high school years when he’d get onto the auditorium stage without using the steps.

Masamichi called Shino’s name again from the unoccupied tea room, but there was still no response.

“I guess he isn’t home yet after all.”

The low table and thick cushions looked inviting, but if he sat down now, he would probably grow roots and become unable to get back up on his feet.

“Shino isn’t here now, which means it’s okay to make noise. Then...”

Masamichi realized it was the perfect time to clean that dusty room of his and looked down at a paper bag at his feet. It was full of the cleaning supplies he had used earlier at the apartment.

“You guys are up again,” he said to his supplies, mostly cheering himself on as he first covered his nose and mouth with a towel he had taken from his backpack.

His nose had been itchy as soon as he walked into the house, and his throat

was getting irritated. His private space was like his castle, and at the very least, it should be an environment that didn't trigger allergic reactions.

“Okay, let's get to it.”

He picked up his paper bag, stood energetically...well, carefully, and went up the stairs to his room.

In such a small house, they should have put the washing machine in the bathing area. The house had a simple shed outside the kitchen door, with a washing machine and dryer inside. Behind it was a small concrete washing area and faucet, probably because it had been the laundry area since the old days, when they didn't have washing machines.

Masamichi roughly folded the washed sheets and various covers, straightened out the wrinkles, put them in the dryer, and breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

His room was mostly cleaned.

Since he couldn't find a futon dryer, Masamichi hung the comforter and pillows over the railing outside the window to dry. He propped up the mattress inside by the window to expose it to light and air. He had heard that you weren't supposed to beat it but felt something bad might be accumulating inside; thus, he said to no one in particular, “Just this once!” and hit it with a futon beater to get rid of dust.

Masamichi decided to give up on the carpet and discard it since it was a cesspit of dust, so he rolled it up and put it outside the house.

The tatami mat that emerged from under the carpet was burned yellow by the sun, but fortunately, it wasn't moldy. After vacuuming and wiping it with a wet rag, the tatami became like the mat in his old apartment, smelling faintly but in good enough condition for living.

Since Shino said he could use the furniture in the room, Masamichi decided to leave it as it was.

The way the room was set up reminded him of his late grandmother. Masamichi wiped down each piece of furniture and stuffed old bags of camphor

and other items into garbage bags.

The wardrobe was almost empty, but the vanity drawers were still intact, with makeup and other miscellaneous items inside.

However, he didn't think he would ever make full use of the mirror; as a result, he decided to leave his watch and other small items in the large space in front of it, along with the reference books and workbooks he had brought, at least temporarily.

*And then... Oh yeah, there's no desk and chair for studying in that room.*

With these in mind, Masamichi returned to the main house from the laundry shed and stopped dead in his tracks in the middle of the tea room.

He had automatically put his entrance-exam study books on the vanity, but he had yet to decide whether he'd take the exam for a third time.

He hadn't given up on his dream to go to university and research better agricultural products so he could help his father and grandfather's farm.

But having failed his college entrance examination twice, it was natural for Masamichi to wonder if he wasn't cut out for higher education.

His parents had given him the same advice. They'd said, *"Think carefully about your future and decide for yourself."*

They were probably trying to gently push Masamichi, who was still very much inexperienced with the ways of the world, to become a man of his own.

*Thinking back, Dad and Granddad never expected me to carry on the family farm, partly because I was a sickly child. That's why I wanted to at least work in agriculture, and they were both very happy with the idea...*

Thinking of his father's and grandfather's smiles when he said he wanted to study agriculture, Masamichi didn't want to give up his dream.

But he also thought that if all his efforts were possibly in vain, it would be better to give up sooner rather than later.

This was Masamichi's first chance to calmly think over these matters since failing his university entrance exam, and he sat down next to the low table and groaned.

“What should I do?”

Naturally, no one answered him.

An e-mail had been sent to his smartphone during the three days he had slept. It was from the prep school where he had taken a practice exam, offering a special price for their course.

Masamichi had no idea how the school had learned about his failure since he hadn't told them anything.

It was a little unnerving, and although he wasn't planning on taking their course, it was as if those total strangers were urging him to hurry up and decide on his future, and that made him uncomfortable.

*But if I give up my dream and ask myself what I want to do, there's nothing else I want to do now.*

Having arrived at such a hopeless fact, Masamichi let his thoughts wander off into a lonely direction.

*I wonder how everyone decides their career path. Could I have talked it over with a friend if I had one?*

Thinking about it made him dizzy, not from pain but from the heaviness of his mood. Masamichi stroked the surface of the well-loved tatami mats in the living room and murmured, “What is going to happen to me?”

Now that he was bent down lightly, he could see the other side of the half-lowered screen. As he continued to gaze at the piles of goods, Masamichi sneezed loudly, having inadvertently removed his towel.

*I'll have to fight my allergies whenever I'm in the tea room if the mudroom isn't cleaned.*

Masamichi crawled to the end of the tea room and looked around.

*Shino had said something scary: that every item there had a soul, and that if I'm disrespectful, I'll get what I deserve.*

He figured it wasn't an issue if he didn't mistreat them.

*Cleaning isn't disrespectful, right? I think everyone and every object would be*



*happy to be clean.*

Masamichi looked at the classic wooden clock on the wall and saw it was already half past four.

The sun was slowly setting, and the earthen floor was lit orange by the western sun seeping in through the window.

*Shino has yet to come home, and I still need to figure out if I can use the kitchen to prepare dinner without his permission... The least I can do is carefully move stuff around a little and tidy up the mudroom. And it can't hurt Shino to have a clean workplace.*

Masamichi covered the lower half of his face with his towel and went upstairs to get his cleaning equipment.

First, he moved any items close to the tea room to the edge of the room, one at a time. Hesitant to place them directly on the tatami mats, he put newspaper sheets down and carefully arranged the items on top.

The items were piled almost as high as the ceiling in some areas, and he used a stepladder he found in the corner of the mudroom. The more carefully he went over the area, the longer it took to clean the place.

Masamichi could stop his thoughts from going around in circles when he worked mindlessly with his fingers, so he continued on autopilot.

Eventually, the floor surface was finally exposed, and to his surprise, it wasn't soil.

"It's brick!" Masamichi cried out in surprise, but it came out muffled under his towel.

Covering the floor were bricks of various colors ranging from orange to brown. They looked hand-fired, unlike the tightly formed bricks of modern buildings with sharp corners.

*So they left only the passageway as a dirt floor and laid brick for the floor where they put the goods. That way, the items would be safe and clean—not that it's all that clean.*

Masamichi, impressed, crouched down and patted the brick surface.

As he brushed through the thick layer of dust, Masamichi felt the cool, hard surface against his fingertips. The slightly rough brick was holding tight to the dust on it.

They were a long, narrow style of brick that Masamichi had never seen before. They had a classic look that was too pretty to be hidden by the goods.

“I want to clear out more space, but let’s sweep the floor here first.”

He would need more room than expected to flatten the piles of items. He had to divide the area into small sections and clean them individually.

*It’ll kick up a ton of dust, but it’s better than nothing.*

There was a vacuum cleaner in one corner of the tea room, but Masamichi didn’t know whether he could use it for the mudroom.

He looked around and found a broom and dustpan under the desk that held the cash register.

Relieved, Masamichi pulled them out and then realized that suddenly sweeping would result in a tremendous amount of dust. If that dust fell on the items after he cleaned them, he would be right back where he started.

“Mom used to scatter used tea leaves at a time like this. She said they would absorb the dust. But the teapot here is empty.”

Thinking it might be better to wipe the floor with a wet rag first, Masamichi returned to the tea room to look for a bucket and a rag.

It happened just as he was about to climb into the tea room—lazily again, without using the stairs.

Masamichi thought he was being careful. But unfortunately, the hem of his shirt caught the hand of a doll styled as a girl, which stood at the edge of the tea room.

“Ah!”

Masamichi reached out with one hand to catch the doll but was a moment too late. The movement of his body made the situation worse, and the doll fell from the tea room and smashed onto the exposed brick floor.

“Aaahh!”

Fortunately, the doll was not ceramic but rather soft, with a resin body, wearing clothes made of fabric.

The doll did not shatter, but being a doll, it looked like it was in pain, lying face up after hitting the back of its head hard against the floor.

“Oh god, I’m so sorry.”

Masamichi, halfway up to the tea room, hurried back down to the earthen floor and apologized as he reached for the doll.

But just as his fingertips were about to touch the doll, he gasped and fell to the floor. His tailbone slammed into the hard brick, and a sharp pain shot up his spine.

Masamichi’s attention was so focused on his right hand, extended to the doll, that he had no room to worry about the pain...

*What the heck was that...?*

A sensation had struck Masamichi’s right hand just before he grabbed the doll, like static electricity when touching a doorknob in winter, only a hundred—no, a thousand times more intense.

The tips of the fingers on Masamichi’s right hand were still numb.

But that wasn’t the only thing that surprised him.

In the gradually darkening store, the doll on the floor began glowing a pale blue.

*Is it some sort of device? I wonder if dropping it turned it on.*

Masamichi was tempted to come up with a reasonable explanation, but even if the doll had some electric setup inside, would its entire body emit a strong light all over, even from its lovely dress?

*No way. That isn’t possible. But that must mean...*

Fear slowly crept into Masamichi’s mind. At the same time, Shino’s words came back to him.

*“Every item you see here has a soul. Be rude, and you will be duly punished.”*

*No. It can't be.*

Masamichi shook his head.

*I feel bad that I made that doll fall, but I wasn't trying to be rude.*

But as Masamichi made excuses for himself, the light from the doll became stronger and stronger...and...

*"Are you going to treat me badly, too?"*

...he heard a distorted, high-pitched voice.

Though it wasn't loud, it resembled a woman's voice. Or perhaps the hoarse tone of an older woman.

Masamichi gulped. It felt like the sound was tapping directly at his ears or, rather, at the auditory cortex of his brain.

He slowly looked around, but there was no one there except himself.

There was no doubt about it. The voice was coming from the doll.

*The doll... Have I made it mad? For real?*

Masamichi had never even considered that an *object* could have *a soul*. His mom always told him to take care of his things or he'd receive divine punishment, but what was happening now didn't seem to be what she had meant.

*"She's cute. Daddy, I want her."*

*"...Huh?!"*

*"She wanted me so badly."*

The doll was speaking. Then it suddenly got up off the floor.

It was such an abrupt movement that Masamichi wondered if someone was manipulating it on invisible strings.

*"She doesn't want me anymore. Says to throw me away. What a terrible thing to do. Just terrible."*

*"Wh-whoa!"*

Both his legs trembling with fear and unable to get on his feet, Masamichi

managed to support himself with his hands and tried to shift his hips backward to get as far away from the doll as possible.

But sadly, the floor space around him was extremely limited, and his back immediately hit another mountain of objects he had yet to dust.

If he kept backing up and dropped another object, he might make that item angry, too.

It was a wild idea but a serious fear for Masamichi, the target of the doll's wrath.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't make you fall on purpose. I'm truly sorry..."

*"You promised I would meet someone nice if I stayed here!"*

The doll stood up without a sound, not listening to a word of Masamichi's apology, as if still controlled by invisible strings.

The doll, which structurally could never have stood on its own, took a step toward Masamichi, then another, its soft body swaying back and forth and left and right.

A small sound escaped from under Masamichi's towel, which still covered his face.

His upper and lower teeth clashed rapidly, chattering as his whole body shook.

"I...said I'm sorry!"

*"Liar. Betrayed me. You promised me..."*

The last word came out like a song, and then the doll raised its arms to shoulder level.

Its eyes, which had been painted onto its face, stared into Masamichi's horrified, wide eyes...then snapped. The eyes were no longer painted. Instead, they were huge, jet-black orbs that seemed to be formed from condensed darkness.

*This can't be happening! You've got to be kidding!*

*"Crossed your heart and hoped..."*

The doll sang a strange verse in an eerie voice as it slowly approached Masamichi. Were its hands aiming for his eyes or his neck?

He couldn't tell, but one thing was for sure. His brain clearly sensed hostility, a desire to kill.

*"Every item you see here has a soul."*

Masamichi realized that Shino hadn't been exaggerating or giving him a far-fetched example.

The young man didn't know the story there. But he easily guessed from the doll's words that *it* had been welcomed into a child's home but became unneeded as its owner grew older and threw it away.

A doll that had found peace and rested in this store had awakened when Masamichi dropped it—with the same fierce anger it had felt before. That was the only explanation for this.

"I'm sorry! It wasn't on purpose!" Masamichi apologized, half crying, but the doll didn't respond to his voice.

The resin doll's small, pointed mouth ripped open wide before him.

*"Oh...oh my god."*

Masamichi was helpless as the doll's hands finally reached for his neck. The touch of its fingertips, colder than ice, made Masamichi breathe heavily like a dog panting.

No matter how it moved or talked, the doll was much smaller than Masamichi, so theoretically, he should have been able to push it away, shake it off, and escape. But Masamichi couldn't move an inch.

His hands seemed glued to the floor, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't lift a finger, and his legs flopped around uselessly like a broken toy's.

It wasn't fear alone that bound Masamichi to this spot. The bluish-white light the doll emitted seemed to press his body down against the floor with tremendous force.

*"...hoped to dieee."*

In the end, the puppet finished singing in a slow, drawn-out tone, and simultaneously, its hands tightened.

*Oh no. This...is seriously bad.*

Its small hands crushed Masamichi's windpipe with frightening precision. He tried desperately to breathe, but it was getting harder and harder to inhale and exhale.

*I'm...going to die. This time, I'm really going to die...!*

The cold from the doll's hands began to steal the heat from Masamichi's body.

Gradually, the fear faded, and now Masamichi's limbs began to cramp from the lack of oxygen.

He wanted to apologize to Shino. And to his family.

Those were Masamichi's final thoughts as his consciousness began to fade.

Then he heard the front door bang open.

A dignified voice whipped his eardrums as the lack of oxygen caused a violent ringing in his ears.

"Stop!"

Masamichi realized it was Shino's voice, and the doll's grip on his windpipe stopped tightening.

The approaching footsteps halted, and large hands grasped the doll's and pulled them away from Masamichi's throat.

Masamichi's hand flew to his throat, and he coughed violently, managing to look up into Shino's face.

Dressed in a suit, albeit a casual one, Shino's body was covered in a pale-silver light, just like the doll... No, not like the doll at all.

The light that Shino emitted conveyed no hostility or harmful intent. However, a faint tension in his body made Masamichi's skin tingle.

"Shino," Masamichi somehow managed to say between coughs, but Shino's gaze ordered him to be quiet, as the man held the doll in his arms like a baby.

*“Liar,”* the doll said to Masamichi, more weakly than before.

Shino looked around and must have instantly understood what Masamichi had tried to do and done.

“I see,” he said quietly.

The sun had set completely, and the only thing that illuminated the area was the light emitted by the doll and Shino, which was enough for the man to see.

He held the doll in one hand and covered the doll’s eyes with the palm of the other, then whispered as if he was soothing a spoiled child.

“I’m the one who made a promise to you. Not him. And he didn’t harm you intentionally. Don’t be rough with him.”

*“But...”*

“Rest here, and one day, your new master will come for you, I promise. So sleep. Leave your anger with me and sleep in peace.”

As Shino gently whispered, the light emitting from the doll gradually weakened.

No sooner had its arms become lax than the light disappeared completely.

“Okay.”

Shino nodded and released his hand from the doll’s face. It was too dark for Masamichi to see, but its face was again printed and two-dimensional.

Shino snapped his fingers, setting the doll on the tea room’s edge.

Immediately, lights somehow flashed on in the tea room and mudroom.

“Whoa! Oh, um, hi, Shino. Uh...sorry.”

Shocked again, Masamichi kept a hand pressed against the stinging pain in his throat as he blinked at the sudden brightness.

“You foolishly ignored my warning, did you?” Shino said in a prickly tone and loosened his necktie with his fingertips.

Masamichi hunched his shoulders, but he also admired Shino’s steady and confident movements.



“I’m truly sorry. I was doing some cleaning—”

“Objects that take on a soul are called artifact spirits.”

“Artifact...spirits?”

“Things that have lived with humans for many years and received human affection sometimes take on a soul. They are beings you would generally call a god—or more like a specter.”

“A god...”

“They aren’t beings that a human like you can easily deal with. You should have felt that in your bones.”

With the tip of his polished leather shoe, Shino gave a light kick to Masamichi’s sandal, which had been thrown onto the floor.

“How many times in a week do you have to come close to dying?”

“...I have no answer to that,” Masamichi said weakly and apologized profusely. Then he fell flat on his back on the filthy brick as the doll had.

He could finally breathe freely, but getting up would take him a little longer.

“Fool,” Shino uttered with simple contempt as his almond eyes looked down at Masamichi with a somewhat amused sparkle...

## CHAPTER 4

### Memories Left Behind

Masamichi had almost accidentally lost his life, which Shino had saved.

That alone was more than enough to make him hate himself, but a few hours later, the person who had saved his life twice was serving him dinner as if nothing had happened, and Masamichi was feeling small as he sat at the low dining table.

*I was depressed in my room, but as a result, I've become a guy who doesn't even help prepare dinner.*

That made Masamichi feel doubly self-conscious.

But when Masamichi tried to apologize, Shino interrupted him with a “Shut up” before he could even say half of what he wanted to. But Masamichi couldn't act as if nothing had happened.

The fear of almost being killed by the doll and the guilt and remorse of not taking Shino's warning seriously should have made him lose his appetite, but the food on the table looked and tasted delicious.

The main dish was simmered beef and tofu, made of thinly sliced beef, leeks, and tofu prepared in a sweet broth. It was accompanied by rapeseed blossoms in mustard dressing, sautéed lotus root, egg drop soup, and freshly steamed rice.

The seasoning of each dish was simple and not too strong, but strangely enough, the flavors were completely satisfying, and everything paired perfectly with the rice. Because many vegetables were used in the meal, Masamichi felt no exhaustion from overeating.

*I didn't think I could eat when I came and sat at the table, but I couldn't stop once I started.*

Masamichi felt brazen for digging in enthusiastically, as if he felt no shame for all that had happened. His rice bowl was also empty, though he still had more than half the food in their dishes.

He was contemplating what to do when Shino, sitting across from him and eating quietly, said without sparing him a glance, “Go ahead and get yourself more rice if you want.”

“Oh, uh, okay!”

Surprised that his master seemed to see everything without looking, Masamichi stood up and went to the kitchen.

A gas-powered rice cooker was set on the corner of the cooking table. Masamichi had never seen one before, and it resembled a slow cooker. Shino said the previous owner’s wife had used it for a long time.

He was sure the rice was of excellent quality, and it was cooked expertly, and when he opened the lid, the rice inside was sparkling, its steam soft and fragrant.

“Uh, would you like another helping...?” Masamichi offered.

“No.”

Masamichi was disappointed by the unapproachable reply and returned to the table with his own refill.

He resumed eating and worked up the nerve to say, “This is really good.”

Meanwhile, Shino popped a brightly colored rapeseed blossom into his mouth and replied in the shortest sentence Masamichi had heard so far: “I see.”

*He’s still mad...though I can’t even tell if that’s the case. Shino is always grumpy, and he often speaks in one-or two-word sentences.*

Masamichi had to keep eating since he couldn’t get a conversation going.

He cut the firm tofu with his chopsticks and put it in his mouth. The rich flavors of meat and leeks dripped from the tofu, which was colored light brown like soy sauce.

“This is really good.”

Masamichi chuckled when he couldn't stop his heartfelt comment from coming out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry. All I've been saying is that the food tastes good. I can't offer eloquent commentary like you can."

Shino's brows rose questioningly.

"Why are you apologizing? What is wrong with what you're saying?"

"Huh?! Oh, uh, nothing's wrong, but I thought it's probably better to give more specific feedback and have a variety of things to say when you comment on the taste of food," Masamichi answered, making Shino look more puzzled.

"Is that standard? Yoriko was always delighted when I said her food tasted good."

"Who's Yoriko?"

"She was the wife of the former proprietor. She did all the cooking when she was alive."

Masamichi was surprised to hear a note of respect in how Shino spoke about Yoriko, particularly considering how arrogant he usually was. Masamichi was curious to learn more about Yoriko and her husband.

"So she's deceased. What about her husband?"

"His name was Daizo," Shino replied with a nostalgic look flashing in his eyes.

"Daizo."

"He used to laugh whenever he mentioned his name to someone, saying, *'I'm small, but the name is Daizo—dai—meaning big.'*"

"Heh-heh! So he was a small man. Was Yoriko the person who taught you how to cook?"

Shino nodded.

"Yeah. She lost the use of her arms and legs for the last few years and told me what to do as I stood in the kitchen... She always sat there," Shino said as he glanced at a stool in the kitchen—most likely handmade. It was two-step, made of wood, and had a round hole between the steps; it was probably used for

storing small items or as a trash can.

Masamichi imagined an older woman sitting on the step on top, resting her feet on the lower step, and smiled.

“Oh, I get it!”

“Get what?”

“You look super fashionable and trendy, but I thought the food you cook had a nostalgic feel.”

“...Are you criticizing me?”

“Of course not! I told you everything’s delicious. Hey, you said you told Yoriko that her cooking was good. Do meals that people eat taste good to specters, too?”

“I savor good ingredients that are cooked appropriately with the right seasoning.” Then he thought for a minute and grinned devilishly. “Of course, humans taste much better. If only I could still eat them as in the old days.”

“Ohhh...let’s forget about that, shall we? But I’m glad to hear you like human food. I guess specters need nutrition just like us.”

Hearing Masamichi’s reaction, which was completely normal for a human being, Shino looked a little sullen, like he was in a bad mood.

“What do you take us specters for? We, too, are alive. We need something to nurture and nourish our bodies and souls. It just doesn’t have to be the same food that humans eat.”

Shino’s suspicious glance made Masamichi shudder involuntarily as the young man recalled the sight of him gnawing on his leg.

“Yeah, but even human food can be nutritious, right?” Masamichi asked.

“It’s less efficient, but it doesn’t hurt that there are so many flavors, cooking methods, and ingredients to choose from.”

“I see. Good.”

Once Masamichi was satisfied, Shino quickly asked, “So someone cooks, and we say the food tastes good. Isn’t that enough for a human cook?”

“Hmm, I don’t know.”

“What about you?”

Masamichi’s gaze wandered in confusion.

“I’ve never had the chance to cook for anyone... Well, I did once. I made a dish at home that I learned in home economics class in elementary school. It was a hamburg steak, boiled potatoes, and an egg drop soup!”

Masamichi beamed as old memories came to mind. Shino looked a little interested and pointed to the soup bowl before him.

“This?”

Masamichi laughed and shrugged.

“I couldn’t cut vegetables as finely as this, the carrots weren’t completely cooked, and the eggs were lumpy. The steak was still a little raw when I set it on the table, and we had to finish cooking it in the microwave. The potatoes were okay. But Mom... My mother said it was really good. Oh yeah, that’s what she said.”

Masamichi gasped.

The praise his mom had given him as a child came vividly back to mind. She had said, *“This is really tasty, Masamichi. I usually only eat what I make, so the meal is super good when someone else cooks for me.”*

“Oh, I get it. It’s okay to say it tastes good, and having someone compliment you feels great. I’d forgotten Mom praised my food once, since it was the only time anyone said it to me.”

“Then that’s good enough,” Shino replied, ending the conversation. Then he wrapped up his meal with a last bite of the rapeseed blossoms. Masamichi followed suit and set out to eat everything in front of him.

“Um, Shino. I’m your servant, and I’m sorry you’ve been cooking for me all this time. I’m not as good a cook as you, but if it’s okay with you, I’ll cook...”

As Shino began preparing the after-dinner tea, Masamichi made his proposition, chewing a large mouthful of food.

But Shino flatly dismissed his offer with his back still turned toward Masamichi.

“It isn’t necessary.”

“But...”

“When we agreed to our contract, I swore I would provide you with food, clothing, and shelter and treat you reasonably well. We must mutually honor the terms.”

Masamichi recalled the night they met.

He had been mortally wounded, and the encounter with Shino, who had suddenly appeared, had been so intense that his memory of the rest of the incident was hazy.

But Masamichi was adamant. “It shouldn’t mean I can’t do any housework.”

“Do what you want, but I’ll do the cooking.”

“Huh...?!”

Pressed by Shino’s strong tone of voice, Masamichi was speechless.

*Is it because he can’t trust me to cook? My cooking skills are certainly nothing to brag about, and I know Shino’s much better at it, but still.*

With Shino persisting like that, it was no use trying to argue, at least not at this point, so Masamichi tried another angle.

“Then you don’t mind if I do the dishes after we eat, or if I clean the house or do the laundry, right?”

“Whatever.”

Shino wasn’t interested in housework other than cooking. In light of the incident a few hours ago, he didn’t forget to warn Masamichi again.

“Don’t tamper with the items in the store without my permission. I now know you aren’t good with dust. I’ll have you work in the coming days—under my supervision—to remedy that.”

Masamichi shrugged and then bowed his head.

“I’m sorry about what happened. I’ll be careful when we do that.”

“Of course you will. It’s for your own good. A specter won’t die from dust.”

Shino returned with a small iron kettle, which was spewing steam from its spout, and carefully brewed the same tea he had made the day before, placing a teacup in front of Masamichi.

“Thank you. And thanks for the food. It was delicious again. Okay, I’m doing the dishes as of today,” Masamichi said as he finished his meal and reached for his teacup.

He was surprised at first by the peculiarly smoky flavor, but once he understood that this was how it was supposed to be, it started to taste good.

“Thanks for the tea. I’m getting used to it. I want to make this tea someday, too.”

Masamichi watched as Shino quietly sipped the hot tea without blowing on it to cool it.

*I guess it doesn’t matter if something’s hot or cold to a specter. Shino’s fine with this piping hot tea, and he was popping one piece of hot tofu after another into his mouth before. Getting a conversation going with him is hard, and he doesn’t seem to be in the habit of greeting people, but...*

Masamichi had been observing Shino for the last two days. Shino never said a word in response to his greetings or anything before or after eating.

*He doesn’t say anything when I thank him for a meal. I guess specters don’t do that sort of thing. Didn’t Yoriko and Daizo teach him human habits?*

The more time he spent with Shino, the more questions he had. But Shino wouldn’t like being bothered with his many questions.

“I’m going to clean up now,” Masamichi said as he stood up, half his tea remaining in his cup. He gathered the dishes, put them on a tray next to the table, and took them to the kitchen.

Shino didn’t say anything as he stood up and headed for the mountains of items in the mudroom. The light still wasn’t on, with only the brightness of the tea room seeping in through the bamboo screen, but the darkness probably



didn't bother a specter.

*He's already going back to work? A specter sure works hard. Or is it just Shino? I guess there are all types of specters since there are all types of people in this world.*

Masamichi couldn't voice his thoughts, but he was impressed. He rolled up his sleeves and started doing the dishes.

It didn't take long to wash, dry, and put away two sets of dishes. He gathered the garbage, put it in the kitchen garbage bin, and cleaned the sink until it was spotless. He glanced at Shino and saw him sitting at the low table doing something.

*So that's where Shino works. I'd better go to my room now so I won't bother him.*

Masamichi decided to say good night to Shino before going to his room, but the older man stopped him when he stepped out of the kitchen.

"Come here. I want to ask you something."

"Oh...o-okay."

Startled by Shino's harsh tone, Masamichi quickly took a seat. Shino had patted the cushion next to him to indicate that Masamichi should sit there instead of across from him. Of course, the young man kept his back straight while in a kneeling position.

"Uh, what is it?"

Sitting on the thickest cushion, Shino asked in a high-handed manner, "About that doll..."

"...I'm sorry about that!"

"Never mind that. I want to ask you how that doll looked to you."

Unable to understand what Shino was asking, Masamichi craned his neck.

"How it looked? Well, it started choking me."

"I'm asking you to describe the doll in detail when it did that," Shino spat out. Masamichi further straightened his back, which was already ramrod straight.

“Oh, okay! First, when I dropped the doll, it started glowing a pale-bluish color all over, then it got up and walked toward me with its hands like this, like a zombie.”

“Hmm.”

“Then...I heard its voice. I think the original owner probably begged her father to buy her the doll when she was a child. It sounded like it was angry with her for throwing it away when she grew up.”

“...Oh. So you heard its voice.”

Shino grinned. His eyes, usually as sharp as a Japanese sword, took on a suspicious, crescent shape. Despite his confusion, Masamichi nodded and continued:

“I was scared, and I don’t remember everything precisely, but it was mad at me, saying something to the effect of expecting to meet a new owner and having something terrible done to it again, and it wasn’t going to forgive me. Oh, and...the face.”

“The face?”

“The eyes and the mouth weren’t printed like they were at first. The mouth was moving, the eyes were an unbelievably deep black, and it was super scary.”

Masamichi shivered as he recalled the scene. Conversely, Shino laughed out loud.

When he heard Shino laugh for the first time, Masamichi’s mouth fell open.

“Ha-ha...I see. I was going to consider how to eat you later on and keep you in a coop without killing you, but you may have other uses. This is getting interesting.”

*It isn’t interesting at all!*

Masamichi didn’t know what to say, and he could only stare at Shino, his body stiff. Shino looked at Masamichi’s pale face with amusement.

“You seem to have a strong affinity with specters,” the man commented.

“A s-strong affinity?”

“In the past—a thousand years ago—the world where people lived was much darker. They acted big during the day, but once the sun went down, we specters ruled a world of darkness until dawn. Humans and specters shared the world and lived in harmony.”

As Shino suddenly started talking about the past, Masamichi momentarily forgot his fear and leaned forward.

“Humans and demons coexisted...? Are you saying people accepted the existence of specters?”

“Naturally. We were afraid of humans during the day, and they were afraid of us at night. We were equals,” Shino said solemnly and lowered his gaze. “But the world has become brighter, and demons have been pushed into what little darkness remains. Humans have forgotten about specters and unwittingly lost the ability to detect us.”

“Are people who haven’t forgotten them psychics?”

“I suppose that’s one way to look at it. Few people now can sense the existence of things that aren’t of their world. It’s difficult for a specter to manifest in a place with light unless they have strong power as I do and have also been given...I mean, forced to have a human form. True darkness is now almost nonexistent, even at night. It’s a difficult world for specters.”

*He was about to say, “given a human form.” To think that he got agitated when I said it.*

It was a minor detail, but Masamichi found it amusing. He relaxed his tense body and forgot his earlier fear.

“I think I understand it a little. But no one has ever said I was psychic, and I’ve never felt like I was.”

“But you accurately sensed the doll’s transformation. You saw it and heard its voice.

“That isn’t possible if you can’t sense specters.”

“Then what happens when someone who can’t sense that doll makes it angry?”

“They will suffer from a physical condition without any idea of what caused it, be cursed every night, and die.”

“Whoa...so whether or not they sense the specter, they’re cursed and killed.”

“It looks that way. And you have the ability to sense specters, so you can help me with my work. You should be of some use.”

Masamichi was surprised by the direction the conversation was taking.

“Your job is to buy and sell antiques, right? I don’t know the first thing about antiques.”

“You don’t need an eye for antiques. *Read* this,” Shino said, pushing a small, narrow box on the table before Masamichi. It was made of wood, painted a light green, and had a beautiful floral pattern on the lid.

A thin, short metal rod protruded from the side. Judging by the color, it was probably brass. After examining it more, it looked like a handle.

The box appeared quite old, and upon closer inspection, the paint was fading and peeling off at the corners. Or perhaps the varnish had discolored.

“What is this...? Is it a music box? Do I turn this rod?”

Shino nodded. “Yeah. Now *read it* without opening the lid.”

“R-read it? Can I...touch it for starters?”

“You can’t *read* it if you don’t touch it.”

Shino said to *read* the box as if it was a regular occurrence. Unsure of what he meant, Masamichi picked up the music box. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his not-very-large hand.

*I thought the word read applied to text. I wonder if it’s different in the world of specters. Maybe they say read for listening to sounds...*

Shino was silent; his lips pursed as he regarded Masamichi like a teacher supervising an exam. There was no way that Masamichi could ask him, “Hey, how do I read this?”

*Okay...I’ll play it. It’s a music box, and that’s how you use it.*

Although he was intimidated by Shino’s piercing gaze, Masamichi gently

grasped the slender handle and slowly turned it.

At first, there was some resistance, but soon, the handle started moving smoothly, and a simple melody began to flow from inside the box.

Masamichi didn't know much about classical music, but this was a tune he had heard before.

"This...is Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*. I've heard it in music class."

"Correct," Shino said, but that wasn't the act of *reading* he had sought since he looked at Masamichi as if to say, "And?"

*Strike one!*

The sound of the music box was simple but beautiful. However, since playing music didn't turn out to be *reading* it, he couldn't sit there and listen to it forever.

*Maybe there's something written on the side or the bottom.*

Masamichi looked closely at the front of the box, but there was no message to be found. All he saw was the name of the music-box manufacturer written in English on the bottom.

"What are you waiting for?"

Shino was gradually becoming irritated. Masamichi gave up, figuring that if his master was going to be mad at him either way, then he might as well be honest and ask for help.

"I don't know how to do it. What am I supposed to *read*? Is there something written here for me to read?"

"Ask me from the start if you don't know what to do. Otherwise, you're wasting time."

Shino stood up suddenly and moved behind Masamichi. Masamichi was surprised to see Shino kneel close to him and tried to turn around.

But Shino scolded him.

"Turn around. And close your eyes."

"O...okay!"

Masamichi was again consumed with fear and anxiety over what he would be made to do, but there was no escape. He had no choice but to do as he was told.

“Here,” Shino said as he touched Masamichi’s eyebrow with his fingertip. It was as cold as ice.

No, it was colder than ice, maybe even colder than dry ice. The frigid air easily penetrated his skin and skull and seemed to pierce his brain.

“Ouch...that hurts, Shino.”

“Shut up. Close your mouth and focus on where I’m touching you. This is where you should have another eye.”

“Another eye?”

Masamichi was surprised, but Shino ignored his reaction.

“For seeing the paranormal. It’s the eye that humans have long ceased to use and forgotten about. Concentrate on that, and you will see what you have in your hand with your third eye.”

“My...third eye.”

Masamichi could hardly believe that such a thing existed.

However, Shino was now touching him from behind, and his existence as a specter was something that Masamichi wouldn’t have believed a week ago. He had never even imagined that such a being existed.

*If Shino says I have a third eye, I’ll have to trust him and make an effort.*

The coldness seeping through Shino’s fingertips caused a sharp pain, and Masamichi tried to focus his attention on its source.

“I’ll help you this one time,” Shino said. “There, that’s it. Your other eye is here, where I’m touching you. Open it.”

*Easy for you to say...*

Perhaps touching the body conveyed the voice of the heart, because Shino immediately advised, “Imagine having a closed eye there.”

And Masamichi replied, “Yes, sir!” in a high-pitched voice.

*An eye here...where it hurts so much...?*

Masamichi closed his eyes tight, held the music box in his left hand, and gently laid his right hand on Shino's fingers, which were between his eyebrows, without realizing it. Instantly, there was an image of a large eyelid closed under his skin.

It was like a budding plant deeply rooted in Masamichi's cerebrum.

*There it is...! Is that my third eye?*

Feeling the chill of Shino's fingers between his brows and right hand, Masamichi turned his focus toward that huge eyelid.

*I'd like to know...what I'll see when this eye opens.*

As if in response to that simple desire, the eyelid slowly opened.

"Yeah, that's it. That's it," Shino whispered behind him. Feeling his cold breath, Masamichi lifted the music box in his left hand.

*Read...the music box...with this eye.*

Masamichi's consciousness was so completely focused on his "third eye" that he didn't notice Shino gasp behind him.

His entire body was hot, as if he had drunk something warm, and the air he breathed was sucked into the large, invisible eye. While experiencing this sensation, he slowly opened his third eye.

*I can see it...!*

When Masamichi thought an iris shining a bright-gold color appeared, he saw something.

It wasn't as clear as when he saw things with his two eyes.

In a world with a heavy fog, he saw that the part of the music box in his left hand was blurry.

*I can make out the shape of the music box... No, that isn't it. I can see through it, see what's inside. That's the only thing I can see clearly.*

He tried to explain what his *third eye* saw, plain and simple.

“Is that a piece of thread in there? Brown thread, wrapped in a thin bundle, wound into a loop.”

“You *read* it,” came Shino’s satisfied voice from behind him. “That object was made in Germany during World War II. A woman gave it to her boyfriend, who was going away to battle. She wanted the music to offer comfort, and she put her hair inside to protect him with its mystical power. With your *third eye*, you saw the woman’s strong emotions, which continue to be lodged in her hair.”

Masamichi felt he could hear her voice from afar and asked quietly, “And... what happened to the man?”

“I heard he died in battle. Human hair doesn’t have the power to dodge bullets. What she did was only to give her peace of mind.”

“Oh no.”

“But the man must have died surrounded by the woman’s chi—or her energy. That should have been some comfort to a human being, not that I care,” Shino said curtly, then placed his finger on Masamichi’s brow. “Open your eyes slowly.”

“...The eyes I usually see with, right?”

After confirming that, Masamichi slowly did as he was told and cried out in surprise.

The lights were off in the tea room.

But he could see. It was because his body was emitting a small amount of soft, golden light.

“Wh-what is this? What’s happening to me?”

He was stunned. He knew Shino was laughing behind him.

“That is your chi. By using your third eye, it now comes out stronger. Close your third eye, and your chi will disappear. Ha-ha. So it’s the color of sunlight filtering through the trees.”

Shino’s voice sounded unusually upbeat and, at the same time, rushed as if holding back pain.



Masamichi became anxious in a different way and called out to him.

“Shino? What’s wrong? I *read* like you told me to, didn’t I? How do I close this third eye?”

“It will close on its own when you stop being aware. Keep practicing, and you’ll be able to control it. Do that quickly.” After speaking gruffly, Shino finally removed his fingers from between Masamichi’s brows and stood up, then took the music box back from him and returned to his cushion.

He continued. “As I said, the items stacked over there are artifact spirits or their equivalent. They were attached to humans for a long time and developed souls based on that.”

“Oh...okay,” Masamichi said, nodding as the light around him faded.

“They are always with humans and are obsessed with receiving their affection. They’ll curse people when they can’t have that.”

“Oh, that’s why that doll got angry.”

“Yeah. I bring items like that here and pass them on to owners they’re compatible with. That’s the work that I do.”

“Owners they’re compatible with? You mean people who will take good care of them?”

“There’s that, but as between humans, there are compatibility issues between objects and people. Some pairs get along, and some don’t. If they do, the objects will accept their new owner’s affection and respond by bringing them good fortune.”

“So they’re similar to lucky items!”

“I don’t really like explaining it lightly that way, but you aren’t mistaken.”

“Sorry,” Masamichi said in a low voice, sensing that he had spoiled Shino’s good mood. “What if they aren’t compatible...?”

“It would be extremely unpleasant for the object. I suppose the artifact spirit would curse the owner.”

“Whoa...then you have a big responsibility finding owners the objects are

compatible with.”

Shino nodded gravely and rubbed the music box in the palm of his hand. “To find a good owner, I must read the destined bond between the parties. But it’s a big job with so many objects here. You have an aptitude for this. Practice and help me with my work.”

“Oh, that’s what it means to *read* things using my *third eye*.”

“Correct. I’ll choose harmless objects that won’t be bothered if you try to *read* them. Do that and practice using your third eye. But...it’s interesting.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Masamichi was confused to see that Shino was in a good mood again.

“Maybe you were meant to appear before me. I decided to keep you as food on a whim, but this is a bonus I hadn’t expected.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

Things were getting more than just suspicious to Masamichi. It was downright spooky. But Shino stood up, looking like he was about to start humming any minute now, and headed back to the mudroom to return the music box to its storage area.

Masamichi didn’t know how things worked, but he heard Shino snap his fingers, and the next thing he knew, the light went on in the tea room.

“Now, go.”

Masamichi was dismissed. There was no room for him to keep asking more questions.

And as a servant, it was wiser to leave while Shino was in a good mood.

“Okay. Good night,” Masamichi said.

Again, Shino didn’t respond.

*Today, yesterday...Shino never says “good night.” I guess specters don’t have a habit of social niceties.*

He thought it was a shame as he rubbed between his brows, feeling as if he was still half asleep.

That night.

“...Ow...”

Pain awakened Masamichi.

He had left the light on. He was still wearing his sweats and wasn't even covering himself with a blanket.

*Come to think of it, when did I fall asleep?*

After returning to his room, his entire body had felt sluggish; he'd been overcome with tremendous drowsiness, then fell on his bed and zonked out.

Masamichi checked his phone and saw it was a little past one thirty AM.

*I probably slept for four or five hours.*

Masamichi placed his hands on the bed and slowly lifted himself.

The pain between his eyebrows was terrible.

*It's where Shino was touching.*

It wasn't a sharp pain like before, but it felt like something was beating, and the pain was throbbing in time to its heartbeat.

“Oww...”

Masamichi pressed between his brows and groaned. Finding it hard to stay awake, he gently lay down on the bed again.

*Is this related to that third eye? It's around the same spot.*

Though he thought the pain would ease if he stayed still, it continued with the same intensity, and he began feeling mildly nauseous.

“This may be bad.”

He wasn't actually about to throw up, but there was no way he could go back to sleep. Besides, it might lead to a grave situation if the pain was related to

that *third eye*.

Suddenly scared, Masamichi staggered and got on his feet again, supporting himself by placing his hands on the headboard.

It was like he was seasick and wasn't in control of his feet, but he was moving okay.

*I'll talk to Shino about this, just in case.*

With his decision made, Masamichi left his room.

He leaned on the railing, stumbled downstairs, and found the tea room was pitch-dark.

There was no sign of Shino. Masamichi lifted the blinds with one hand and turned on the light, but the specter wasn't there.

The light directly above the passageway dimly illuminated the high piles of goods along both walls.

Masamichi quickly pulled down the blinds when he saw that doll and turned out the light.

He wanted to believe that thanks to Shino, its anger had dissipated. But it was still scary.

*Oh yeah, Shino said his room was over in that direction.*

Masamichi crossed the tea room and headed for the farthest room on the ground level.

He stood before the paper screen that served as the door, hesitating whether to knock or call out to him, when he heard a voice say, "Come in."

It was probably easy for the specter to notice the sounds that Masamichi made.

Surprised and impressed, Masamichi said, "Excuse me," and quietly stepped inside.

It was the first time Masamichi entered Shino's room.

It was the same size as the small room he had been given. The difference was the bluish tatami mats, an outdoor corridor beyond half-open sliding doors, and

a view of a humble garden through sliding glass doors and timber screens.

“You’re still awake?” Masamichi asked.

Shino was sitting cross-legged on the tatami mat, looking at a picture scroll in front of him, and answered brusquely, “Unlike you humans, specters don’t have to sleep unless they are truly exhausted.”

“You don’t?”

“Though, the comfort of a bed is mysteriously addictive. I’ve gotten into the weird habit of sleeping as a form of entertainment.”

Just for a moment, Masamichi forgot the pain he was in and smiled. Although Shino probably wasn’t aware, sleeping as entertainment was oddly funny.

“Sorry to bother you. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Go ahead,” Shino said, neatly putting the scroll away and placing it on a writing desk.

“I got a glimpse of that scroll. Was that a picture of a barn? Is the scroll from the Heian period?”

“Later than that. It’s a work by a painter from the Edo period who imagined what it was like for the people who lived in Heian-kyo. His skills weren’t bad, but he seems to have glorified the times a little. That’s a strange tendency humans have. They distance themselves from the present and dream about the past when there’s no point dwelling on it.”

With that philosophical-sounding statement, Shino gestured with his chin for Masamichi to sit down, so with a touch to his still-aching shoulder, the young man sat facing Shino.

“And? What do you want?”

Masamichi was direct. “It hurts terribly between my eyebrows,” he said.

Sounding unconcerned, Shino said, “That’s to be expected.”

“Expected?”

“I helped, but you suddenly forced open your third eye. Naturally, you would experience pain and fatigue.”

“...I’m super tired, my body aches like hell, and it hurts between my brows.”

“Let’s see.”

Shino didn’t blame Masamichi for complaining. He reached for his face and touched between his brows as he had done earlier. Then he said in a flat tone, “Ah.”

“Wh-what is it?”

Masamichi looked anxious, and Shino sighed.

“You’re really clumsy. You opened your third eye but failed to close it. Of course you would be tired, and your third eye must be complaining that it was suddenly awakened and has not been allowed to rest.”

“It isn’t closed?! But I’m not seeing anything peculiar.”

“The third eye won’t see anything if there is nothing to *read*.”

“How do I close it?”

“Wait a minute.”

Shino shut his eyes briefly, keeping his finger on Masamichi’s brow.

To Masamichi’s surprise, when Shino opened his eyes, he found that his headache had been whisked away.

“Oh! My headache’s gone! Does this mean my third eye is closed?”

“I closed it for you. You have to learn how to do this yourself. Remember how it just happened.”

“I...don’t quite get it.”

“You’ll learn if you keep practicing. You’re some servant, foolishly wasting the energy from the meal I cooked.”

Masamichi couldn’t understand how he was at fault, but he fidgeted, sat up straight, and apologized.

“I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m sorry. Does this have something to do with me being food for you?”

“Precisely. But you’ve come at the right time. I think I’ll have a taste.”

“...A taste?”

With that brief warning, Shino licked his lips.

Masamichi involuntarily backed away, recalling the expression on Shino’s face and the graphic sounds he’d made while licking his blood.

“Don’t try to run, servant. Your heart will explode.”

“Ngh...I—I know that. I know I agreed to be your food.”

“That’s right. Body and soul, you are mine. I can’t capture and eat people because of my former master’s curse, but you’re bound by contract to offer me your body.”

“I...know that, but...”

Masamichi began trembling, imagining having his arms and legs torn from his body again.

He was no longer just afraid of Shino. He had begun to feel a kind of affection for him.

But when his true nature as a specter manifested, it was terrifying.

“Um, now?” Masamichi asked hesitantly.

“Yeah, now. You’re the one who came to my room and got me in the mood. I had planned to wait until you recovered your energy, but a little taste won’t kill you.”

“I’d...appreciate it if you could stop judging things by whether or not they’ll kill me.”

“What?”

“Oh, um, nothing... Uh, which part of me will you eat?”

Masamichi was bold in an odd way. Despite being afraid, he was somehow curious. Shino grinned when he noticed Masamichi trembling.

“I’ve been thinking about that since the night we met. Flesh and blood would be nice, but regenerating them would be a pain in the ass. It isn’t efficient, considering the work I’d have to do.”

*I'd love it if you would decide it's too much trouble,* Masamichi prayed from the bottom of his heart as Shino sounded like he was enjoying this.

"The taste of your flesh and blood certainly knocked me off my feet," Shino said. "And now I know why."

With a shudder, Masamichi asked, "Wasn't it because you were excited since you hadn't eaten people for about a thousand years?"

"There is that, but that isn't all... Your blood and flesh tasted superb. I would even say it tasted like sweet nectar."

"Ngh. There you go with the food review again."

Masamichi was getting fed up with it, but Shino continued earnestly, "I remember experiencing the taste a long time ago, and that bite of you gave me a strange sense of nostalgia, though specters aren't supposed to feel such an emotion."

"The taste of my flesh and blood made you nostalgic?"

Shino nodded, then muttered, "Let's give it a try."

"Give *what* a try?"

No sooner were the words out than Masamichi's view of the room spun.

Masamichi had been slammed against the tatami mat. He had no idea what was going on.

"Ngh!"

He was suffocating. As he moaned in anguish, he realized something cold and heavy was on top of him.

"Huh?!"

When he realized it was Shino's body, Masamichi's instincts went on red alert as if emergency lights were flashing violently in his mind.

"Sh-Shino?"

With the bigger man on top of him, Masamichi could hardly move.

Masamichi lay stunned as Shino grabbed his wrists and held them securely



above his head.

“There’s a better way than eating your flesh and blood,” Shino said. “I’d forgotten after a thousand years of doing nothing.”

He drew closer to Masamichi’s trembling face and said in a singsong voice, “I can rape you. I can do you and eat up your *energy*, and I won’t have to damage your body. It’s an extremely simple method.”

“R...rape me?”

Masamichi suddenly realized Shino’s intentions. This time, he struggled with all his might to escape from Shino’s hold, but the specter easily suppressed Masamichi’s resistance with his own body, and with his free hand, he grabbed his servant’s face, which was completely drained of blood.

With his face held in place, Masamichi could not escape the specter’s golden eyes.

“Sh-Shino.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you enjoy it, too; your *energy* will lose some of its sweetness if you remain frightened.”

“You don’t really mean it...do you?”

“I’m going to rape you. You’re my servant and have no right to reject me.”

Once again, Shino declared what he was about to do and removed his hand from Masamichi’s face. Then he grabbed Masamichi’s sweatshirt and ripped it open as if tearing a thin sheet of paper.

Now that he could feel the cool night air on his chest, Masamichi trembled even more.

*Of course I don’t want him to tear my limbs apart...but...this is too much!*

Shino had been so good to him that Masamichi had started to like the man, but this was another story.

*Not that...!*

Shino’s pupils became thin vertical lines, and those beastly golden irises began glowing with a ferocious light. Meanwhile, Masamichi’s wide eyes didn’t

even blink.

Shino's lips curved, revealing short, fang-like canines.

Masamichi was pinned to the tatami like a specimen in a collection of insects, and the only thing he could do was gather all the strength he had in his body...

## CHAPTER 5

### A Specter and a Human

Masamichi couldn't tell if it was a *thud* or a *thunk*, but he heard a dull sound.

At the same time, sharp pain shot through his forehead again. His vision blacked out, and the pain was so intense that he felt faint.

"Ngh!"

The pain nearly made him forget to breathe, but he gasped and managed to inhale, when a low, guttural groan came from directly above him.

Shino's body, which had securely restrained Masamichi, slowly moved away from him.

*...Huh?*

Masamichi opened his eyes. He had shut them tight reflexively, afraid of being mesmerized by Shino's gaze.

He saw the ceiling; it was a splendid wickerwork.

*I guess I'm lying on my back...,* he thought hazily. *My head hurts. It hurts so much that I think my brain must be leaking.*

He carefully touched his forehead to see if it was cut or bleeding and was relieved to find that it wasn't. He realized simultaneously that his hands had been freed.

"Huh?"

Masamichi placed one hand on the tatami mat, pressed his throbbing forehead with the other, got up carefully, and cried out in surprise.

Shino, who had been holding him down moments earlier, was also lying on his back. Masamichi couldn't see the man's beautiful face, which was covered with his right hand.

“Uh...Shino? Are you okay?”

“Bastard,” he croaked from between his fingers. “How dare you defy me?”

Masamichi instinctively pressed his hand to his heart.

Fortunately, it didn't appear that he'd violated the contract. Masamichi's heart didn't seem about to explode yet, and it was still beating a healthy rhythm.

“S-sorry! Um, did I possibly—?”

“‘Possibly’ my ass. You have some nerve, head-butting me.”

“Oh, I was afraid of that.”

Masamichi looked up at the ceiling.

He had panicked when Shino set out to rape him, and he'd tried to move whatever part of his body he could to resist. His head was the only mobile thing, and he had slammed it with all his might into Shino's forehead, which happened to be right in front of him.

It was an unconscious move and the only way for Masamichi to fight back, but it was also an unexpected attack for Shino.

It was just a head-butt, but there was a saying that a cornered rat would bite a cat. The strike appeared to have been a big blow to Shino.

“Uh...are you okay?”

Finally recovering from the pain in his forehead, Masamichi tried to crawl over to Shino but stopped when the man spoke, his voice as sharp as a whip.

“Shut up. You should be more concerned about what will happen to you, Masamichi.”

Remaining on his back, Shino moved his hand off his face and glared at Masamichi.

His eyes looked human again, but his expression was filled with rage, and Masamichi reflexively withdrew the hand he had reached out to Shino.

“I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. But this is one thing I can't do.”

“Why not?”

Shino asked the question with a straight face. He looked unhappy but seriously wanted to know why Masamichi was resisting.

Stumped, Masamichi tried to answer his question.

“I think most people don’t like it when someone forces themselves on them.”

“Then shall I tear your limbs off? Would that make you happier?”

“That wouldn’t make me happy, either! But...if I had to choose, I’m scared, and I don’t want it to happen, but I’d rather have my arms and legs torn off,” Masamichi replied in a trembling voice. He knew Shino might instantly dismember him and he’d be nearly dead again—he had a dangerous air about him.

Masamichi tucked his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms tightly around them, bracing himself for the worst.

But Shino lay on his back and turned his head, looking as if he couldn’t understand Masamichi.

“How different is it between having your limbs torn off and being raped?”

“There’s a world of difference! At least to me!” The shock from Shino’s words and actions was tremendous, and Masamichi shouted louder than he ever had. “It would kill me to have my limbs ripped off, but only my body would be hurt. Being raped... That’s physical and mental damage. I can’t accept that.”

Masamichi had placed both hands on the tatami mat and was looking down at Shino from above. Shino blinked slowly and stared back at him. Masamichi’s baby face, stiff with fear and anger, was reflected in his beautiful, flawless eyes.

“I don’t really get it. Being raped should be easier for you. You could enjoy it if you let yourself, and you wouldn’t be left with so many marks. I wouldn’t have to go to the trouble of fixing your body, and above all, we wouldn’t mess up the house.”

Frustrated, Masamichi hit the mat. “That isn’t the issue!”

“Then explain it. I may be convinced, depending on what you say. If not, I’ll rip an arm off you and have a taste... I was trying to be compassionate, you know,”

Shino said unhappily, looking genuinely puzzled.

Masamichi's fear gradually faded as he saw past the beautiful face and discovered a spoiled brat. He was still mad at Shino for his sudden barbaric behavior, but he was settling down.

*He's a specter. I can't blame him for not understanding human feelings. I don't know what birds or cats are thinking, either.*

Masamichi mulled over the fact that Shino wasn't a human being.

*Shino looks human and speaks Japanese, so I've seen him as a regular guy, but that's wrong. He's a specter. I wonder what...sexual conduct means to specters.*

"Doesn't it mean anything to you to do what you're suggesting? Isn't there a reason for doing it?"

Masamichi asked his question quietly, acting more like his usual self, and Shino scowled, thought it over, and shrugged.

"You mean raping humans? Before Tokifuyu put a spell on me, when I became hungry, I would pick and choose tasty humans, rape them, and consume their *energy*, then tear them apart and devour their flesh and blood. If it excited me, I also ate their bones."

Masamichi was on the verge of imagining a scene like that and shook his head.

"That isn't something I want to imagine, but for you, Shino, sexual acts are a part of eating, huh?"

"Yeah, that's right...," Shino said, nodding, then correcting himself. "That's how it used to be."

"Used to be?"

Masamichi was quick to press, but Shino dropped the subject and returned his gaze to Masamichi.

"So what? I ordered you to be my food. That was one of the terms of our contract. And if I want to rape you so I can feast on your *energy*, you should unconditionally offer yourself to me."

“But...! But contracts should be made under mutual agreement.”

“And you agreed to it that night.”

Masamichi had never been outspoken enough with his thoughts that he argued with anyone.

But his instincts told him it'd be the end of the line for him if he backed down now, so he forced words out of his brain.

“We agreed that I would be your food! But for me, s-sex isn't the same thing. How can I explain it...? Going to bed together is different.”

“Then what does it mean to you to have someone rape you?”

“I already said it. Sex without mutual consent does mental and emotional damage. I...may not be convincing since I've never actually done it, but we're living beings who can speak, so it should be something we both agree on.”

“Then agree to it now. I'll start over.”

Shino got up smoothly, and Masamichi quickly pulled back.

“That's not what I mean! It isn't easy to agree to something like that. Of course, uh...I think it depends on the individual. I know that some people have sex just for the fun of it. And some do it to support themselves financially.”

“Exactly. And you can let me rape you as your duty as my servant.”

“I told you I can't do it. It's something I want to do with someone I truly love. Being your *food* doesn't include h-having...sex with you, at least not now. But see? My heart hasn't exploded. Isn't that proof...that I'm not violating the terms of our contract?”

“Hmm...”

It was a feeble comeback, but Masamichi appeared to have struck a chord.

“Damn, this is why making a verbal contract is so annoying. You can find any number of loopholes.”

Despite Shino's frustration, Masamichi finally breathed a small sigh of relief.

It seemed that he would not lose his life by refusing to have physical relations with him.

Masamichi calmed down and opened his mouth, searching for the right words to convey his feelings.

“It’s embarrassing to say things like that since I’ve never been in love.”

“Love?”

The idea seemed foreign to Shino, and he repeated the word, looking like he had eaten something sour.

“It’s developing feelings for someone special to you. These days, you can fall in love with members of the opposite sex, your own sex— Oh, wait, it doesn’t have to be limited to people. I think it can be an animal, an object, or maybe even a character in a story. I have yet to fall in love with any.”

“Is there a difference between like and love?”

“Ngh!”

The simpler and deeper the question, the harder it was for the one answering to avoid it. Masamichi racked his brains frantically.

“I’m not the right person for this kind of talk,” he said, then continued. “I think love is a special kind of feeling. You want to be with someone, be close to them, k-kiss them, have sex with them. They’re people who make you want to do those things with them.”

“You sound indecisive.”

“I told you I’m not experienced! I hardly have any friends; how could I ever fall in love?! Of course, I’ve had a crush or two, but I never told anyone I loved them, so it’s the same as never having been in love.”

Masamichi covered his face. He sounded proud to be an inexperienced virgin. His cheeks were blazing hot beneath the palms of his hands.

Knowing Shino, he would probably say, “I don’t know,” or “It’s foolish.”

And then he’d probably tear off one of Masamichi’s limbs and eat it.

But the words that hit Masamichi’s ears as he hid his face in despair were...

“All right.”

“Huh?!”



“You’re right; you aren’t dying. It must mean that raping you wasn’t included in your obligation to be food for me. That’s my mistake. And bound by my master’s curse, I’m forbidden from attacking and eating humans. Since it isn’t included in our contract, I can’t force myself upon you and rape you.”

“You can’t? G-good.”

Masamichi lowered his arms in relief, only to be struck with another wave of hopelessness the next moment.

“However, I’m in the mood to eat you a little. I will fulfill that desire no matter what.”

“I guess you would... Ngh.”

Masamichi slumped his shoulders and thought for a moment, then adjusted the front of the sweatshirt Shino had just ripped and pointed both toes toward him.

“I don’t want you to tear off any part of me because I think the pain alone would kill me, but maybe take my legs, if you must.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, you’re the one who adjusted the length of my fingers to the way you like them. It’s a shame to have you eat them after you fixed them.”

“You’ve got nerve in a strange way,” Shino said, laughing wryly as he regained his usual cool. “I’d like to say I’ll take a leg, but tonight, I wish to taste your *energy*.”

“That *energy* you’re talking about... Do you mean that golden light that came out of my body when I *read* that music box?”

Shino nodded. “Yeah.”

Masamichi looked at his hands, which didn’t seem to be emitting anything now.

“I wonder if that *energy* is like a person’s aura.”

Shino agreed with a reluctant look on his face. “I don’t like that description, but I suppose it’s the same. Your *energy* is your life force or an expression of the

soul.”

Now it was Masamichi’s turn to ask a simple question. “Life force, huh? Well, eating that would certainly give you *energy*. It sounds a lot better than having my arms and legs ripped off. Will we have to use my third eye again?”

Shino shook his head. “Not necessarily. *Energy* is always released from your entire body, though in extremely small quantities, making it impossible for the average person to see.”

“I see. So we release more *energy* when we’re super nervous like I was a while ago or when we use all our strength to do something, and you can see it.”

“And when one climaxes during communion of the flesh—”

“Let’s move away from that topic for now,” Masamichi quickly said, cutting Shino off. “But wouldn’t it all be tense *energy* if a person kept getting nervous or bold? I wonder if there isn’t a different way...a good way to release *energy*.”

Shino considered that.

“Tokifuyu...my late master said the best-quality *energy* is released when humans feel warm inside.” Masamichi mulled over the words of Shino’s master, a man he had never met. “I have no idea what that’s like since specters don’t have such emotions.”

*So he doesn’t know what it’s like to have warm feelings...*

Masamichi stored each new piece of information he learned about specters in his brain, traced his memory, and said, “What if...?”

“Have you come up with a good idea?”

Masamichi nodded and stood. His forehead still hurt, but it wasn’t so bad that he couldn’t stay on his feet.

“Excuse me.” He pulled open a sliding door to a closet. As he guessed, mattresses and blankets were neatly put away on the shelves.

“We’ll use this mattress. Shino, can you please make a little room?”

“...What? Are you choosing to be raped after all?”

“No. I said let’s move away from that topic. What I’m trying to suggest is...”

Masamichi laid out the mattress and said shyly, “I’m going to do what I know to be the best way to get warm. Will you join me?”

“Hmm?” Shino responded, a little interested.

“I thought we could try to simply rest on the mattress together without rough stuff like s-sex.”

Shino hadn’t expected that. It seemed ludicrous to him, and he laughed.

“Rest on the mattress together? With a skinny guy like you? That doesn’t exactly have the same appeal as a woman’s soft body.”

Even Masamichi was annoyed to have someone belittle him like that.

“We aren’t going to have sex or anything, so it doesn’t matter if I’m skinny! Come on, you don’t have to fall asleep. Just get under the blanket.”

“I’m under no obligation to have my servant tell me what to do, but I can go along with it today. I’ll rip off your leg if I’m not satisfied, though.” Despite his warning, Shino was clearly intrigued.

“What kind of threat is that? Just get over here.”

“Excuse me?”

“Please.”

“All right.”

Shino removed his cardigan and socks and slipped under the blanket, wearing a thin long-sleeved shirt and sweatpants.

Masamichi turned off the light, removed the shirt that Shino had ripped, then wriggled into the small space Shino left available for him. He had on a T-shirt and sweatpants.

There was only one pillow, and naturally, Shino rested his head on it like it was to be expected. Masamichi may have been small, but there were two men on a single mattress. Of course, it was cramped.

As they lay on their backs and looked up at the ceiling in the darkness, Shino said grumpily, “What’s so interesting about this?”

Masamichi made his small body even smaller and tried to explain:

“When I was a child, I would get scared and lonely and often ran to my parents’ room next door.”

“...Huh.”

“Then my mom would take me back to my room, saying Dad might get hurt at work the next day if we woke him, and went to bed with me like this.”

Seeing how serious Masamichi was, Shino chuckled. “Hmm? Are you saying that two people are enough to fend off dream demons?”

“No, that’s not it. You feel relaxed and less scared when you’re under the covers, warmed by the heat of two bodies, and fall asleep with a smile on your face. That’s the warmest feeling I know.”

Stopping there, Masamichi wriggled uncomfortably and managed to rustle about and turn toward Shino.

“But, Shino, you...don’t have a body temperature, do you?”

Shino nodded as if to say “of course not.”

“This body is only a human form that my master created with mystical force. Regardless of how exquisite his work may be, he didn’t go so far as to give me body heat.”

“Right. So it may take a while to get warm since we only have my body heat. But I’m sure it’ll warm up as we talk.”

“Talk? That’s all? Then we don’t have to stay crammed on this mattress...”

“It’s okay. This coziness is part of the appeal. Now, what should we talk about?”

“You started it. Be responsible and take charge. I won’t do anything other than take part in this charade.”

Masamichi, whose chest was close enough to touch Shino’s other arm, looked around to find something to discuss.

He eventually asked what he wanted to know most at the moment.

“Shino, how did you become the heir to this business? And how have you lived for all these years since the Heian period?”

It was perfectly natural for Masamichi to wonder about these things. Shino remained on his back, gave Masamichi a sideways glance, and said flatly, “It’s too much trouble to cover almost a thousand years.”

But Masamichi clumsily persisted.

“Just bits and pieces will do! Like a synopsis for a TV suspense drama...”

Shino looked glum for a while and eventually opened his mouth with some reluctance. “For the most part, there isn’t anything from those thousand years that’s worth mentioning.”

“What?! Didn’t things happen in your life?”

“No. All I had was boredom.”

“Boredom? You were bored for a thousand years?”

Shino nodded.

“After parting with my master, Tokifuyu, at the time of his death... That may not be quite right, but anyway, I was locked in a pot and buried.”

“Huh?! How did that happen?” Shocked, Masamichi lifted his head from the mattress.

Shino continued with no change to his expression.

“My master didn’t undo the spell he cast on me, even on his deathbed. Instead of freeing me, he used me as a magical object of worship to seal the ancient capital’s demon’s gate.”

“The ancient capital? Oh, Heian-kyo... You mean Kyoto.”

“Yeah. He stripped me of my power so I couldn’t manifest in a human form, put me in a pot, buried me, built a small shrine on top, and locked me up for good.”

Masamichi imagined the scene and swallowed.

“Then what happened?”

“Nothing.” He spoke of it lightly, but his tone was tinged with anger and bitterness. “There I was in that small pot, sending out my *energy*, watching the transitions in the outside world. After becoming too weak to do even that, I

waited blankly for the day I would disappear, leaving no trace of dust.”

“You were locked in a pot for a thousand years...? I wouldn’t necessarily call that boring. You must have been sad and lonely.”

“Apparitions have no such emotions. All I had remaining was intense anger and resentment toward my late master. That’s probably what kept me alive.”

“Oh god...why did your master do something so terrible to you?”

Shino looked up at the ceiling and spat out, “That sort of thing is typical for spiritual mediums. They’d do anything to achieve their goals. In that sense, they were worse than specters.”

“I can’t believe it. But oh, you aren’t dead; you’re free, and you’re back in human form. How did you escape from the pot?”

Shino finally turned his head and looked at Masamichi.

“I didn’t escape. The pot and the shrine were both destroyed.”

“What?! Someone destroyed the shrine protecting Kyoto from demons?”

Masamichi blinked a few times in shock. Shino’s lips curved cynically.

“That wasn’t the only gate they had repelling demons. Don’t underestimate the protective measures put in place by the capital. Still, times have changed, and humans today take invisible protection lightly. They love power spots, spiritual things, and the mysterious, but they also tear down barriers and gates that keep demons away in residential projects without a second thought. Humans are foolish creatures.”

“I think I get what you’re saying. People are indeed like that. So about the shrine where you were locked up—was it destroyed in a construction project?”

“It happened at the beginning of this century. A huge old estate was destroyed, and the land was developed for small, ready-built houses. The shrine got in the way and was removed, the soil was dug up, and the pot where I’d been trapped was smashed in the blink of an eye.”

“Whoa. That would weaken Kyoto’s protection...but that’s what set you free, right? I have mixed feelings about this,” Masamichi said with confusion.

“Yeah, I was set free but weak, about as substantial as a drop of water. I figured that Tokifuyu’s curse would have ended after a thousand years. I could eat insects, fish, frogs, snakes, and birds...and once I ate humans, I would be a specter at full strength. That’s what I thought, but it wasn’t that simple.”

“Your master’s curse continued.”

Shino clicked his tongue repulsively.

“Tokifuyu continues to tie me down, even a thousand years after his death. I was freed from the pot, but this human form is all I could go back to. In other words, I had no choice but to mingle with humans.”

Masamichi was thinking about how tough that must have been for him, when he suddenly said, “Huh? Hey, that all happened in Kyoto, right? How did you get here to Kanagawa from Kyoto?”

Shino frowned and pursed his lips momentarily, then told Masamichi the truth.

“At first, I couldn’t keep up with the advances in civilization. Cars, trains, airplanes, and even bicycles felt like threats to me. Roads were paved hard, people’s attire was unfamiliar, and the language differed drastically.”

“Well, many things must have changed since the Heian period.”

“Yeah. Even in human form, all I could do for a while was wander around the city. There were some things that reminded me of the Heian period, but they weren’t going to be helpful.”

“I guess not. And?”

“You call them *homeless*, correct? I mingled with them, then some peculiar people who wanted to take care of this and that for me appeared. When I couldn’t tell them who I was, they assumed I had amnesia and helped me get documents with a human identity.”

“Oh! That’s how you became Shino Tatsumi!”

Shino laughed when Masamichi put his hands together in sudden comprehension under the blanket.

“Yeah. The surname that immediately came to me was my master’s. As for my

first name, I can only call myself by the name he gave me since I'm bound to it."

"I see!"

"Thanks to some kindly souls, I did day labor and accumulated some money. Hearing that Tokyo was now the capital, I decided to go and see it."

"Okay."

Masamichi was completely absorbed in Shino's story and urged him to continue.

"But there were too many people in Tokyo, and it was too chaotic. I became annoyed and came to Yokohama. It wasn't as bad as Tokyo."

"It wasn't as bad..."

"I thought that if I was in or near the new capital, I might come across someone who could break my curse, but I had no way of searching for that kind of help."

"I'm not surprised. I don't think you'd find someone like that online or in a phone book. You might get a hit online, but there's no way to tell if they are trustworthy."

Shino nodded unhappily.

"While wandering around aimlessly, I passed by this store. I felt a strange presence, opened the door, and found that the previous owner had mishandled an artifact spirit here and would soon die under the effects of a curse."

"What? Did Daizo have the ability to see things like that?"

Shino shook his head.

"No, but he'd been suffering from unexplained health issues. I went inside on a whim and calmed the spirit. Daizo's condition improved immediately, and he and his wife, Yoriko, invited me inside...and let me stay when I said I had nowhere to go."

"So that's how you came across this place! It was by coincidence."

"Yeah."

Shino glanced around.



“Daizo vacated his room for me and moved to Yoriko’s room on the second floor. That’s the room you’re using. The elderly couple began living there.”

“Why were they so nice? Maybe you saved his life, but he wouldn’t have known what you did.”

Shino nodded vaguely. “But as soon as I came here, Daizo’s condition improved remarkably. They called me the God of Fortune.”

“The God of Fortune! When you’re a specter.”

Shino laughed at how surprised Masamichi was.

“Exactly. The couple had lost their only son to a disease. Then I came along, and they must have seen me as a godsend, someone who they could pass on the business to. They used me.”

“You shouldn’t say it like that,” Masamichi mumbled, and Shino rubbed his cheek roughly.

“Don’t look so hurt. It was their right. And I’ve only benefitted by meeting them, since the best way to mingle with humans is to live with them. I lived with them for over a decade and inherited the house and store. That’s the story of my thousand years.”

After finishing his tale, Shino stopped talking and looked at the ceiling again.

Masamichi commented, “That was really a brief outline. But it was both short and long.”

“Yeah.”

“So, Shino, you struggled alone for a thousand years until you came here and met Daizo and Yoriko.”

“I didn’t particularly struggle.”

“Sure you did. Maybe you don’t see it as struggling, but I’m sure you struggled.”

“You know nothing about it. Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“Sorry. But if I put myself in your position and imagine what it must have been like, I think it would have killed me.”

“That’s because you’re a weak human being. Apparitions live much longer than humans. A thousand years is nothing to us.”

*He’s lying. No one, not even a specter, would be okay with being locked up for a thousand years.*

Resting his head on his arm, Masamichi tried to imagine being trapped alone in a small jar for a thousand years. But something like that was beyond the scope of the human imagination.

*How lonely had he been? Shino said he doesn’t have those emotions, but I wonder if he’s lying. Is there any being that doesn’t understand the idea of loneliness?*

Since they first met, Shino was all strength, toughness, and dependability with an air of supernatural mystery. For the first time, Masamichi felt that he had found a tiny morsel of weakness in him.

*Shino must have had complicated feelings about his deceased master. And Daizo and Yoriko—I’m sure it was wonderful for Shino to meet them. I’d like to know more about the people Shino has met. And—*

Masamichi’s eyes widened in surprise at his emotions.

*—I also want to know more about Shino. I want to get closer to his feelings. His heart.*

Masamichi truly felt that way.

The fear of what Shino had been about to do to him still whirled around in Masamichi’s chest. He also knew instinctively that Shino could really tear off his limbs if he let his guard down.

Still, he was drawn to him and wanted to grow closer to him.

“It’s getting warm under this blanket.”

“Yeah,” Shino replied as if it didn’t matter. “How long are we going to stay this way?”

“A little longer,” Masamichi said, worked up his nerve, pulled out a hand, and began tapping Shino’s chest.

Shino snarled at Masamichi's unexpected move, looking like a carnivore.

"What are you doing? You dare hit your master?"

"I'm not hitting you that hard. It's called patting," Masamichi said with a smile.

"Patting? What's that?"

"It's hard to explain, but my mom always patted me gently to sleep when I was a child. Slow, gentle patting over the blanket made me feel calm and sleepy."

"I—"

"There was one time I wanted to return the favor to Mom and tried doing the same thing. Strangely enough, I was the one who felt warm and calm, and... Oh." Masamichi froze, and his mouth hung open. That golden light began emitting from the young man's body; it was much more gentle and mellow than when he opened his *third eye*. "Shino, this—"

"Yeah...continue," he ordered. Masamichi did as he was told and patted Shino's thick chest in a gentle, steady rhythm.

*Oh, I get it. I'm trying to give him what comfort I can. It might be out of line for a servant to do that, and I may not know how tough it is to live for a thousand years, but still.*

As Masamichi mulled such thoughts, the light that gushed out of his body moved through his arms and the palms of his hands and covered Shino.

The specter closed his eyes and sighed. "That's it," Shino said softly, making Masamichi look up at his gorgeous face.

"That's what?"

Shino's eyes slowly flicked open.

"That's your *energy*, with its color and warmth like the sun through the trees. Sweeter than your blood, sweeter than your flesh. It is indeed a sweet nectar."

"What? You mean *energy* has a taste?!"

Shino closed his eyes again and nodded.

“Yeah. There’s just one other person who has *energy* with the same taste and color as yours.”

“Who?” Masamichi asked.

But Shino didn’t answer. Instead, he said, “I wondered what type of child’s play you were getting into, but it’s better than I thought. It allows me to indulge in your *energy*. This is part of the contract, correct?”

“Yeah. Anytime, if you’ll settle for this...though it’s a little cramped.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Shino said, then his powerful arms wrapped around Masamichi’s hips and pulled him close.

“...!”

After what happened earlier, Masamichi tensed up, but Shino didn’t try anything beyond that.

It meant nothing other than ensuring that Masamichi remained under the blanket.

In the same way as long ago, when he returned the favor to his mom, Masamichi yawned.

“I’m getting tired,” he said honestly.

Shino, with his eyes closed, responded, “It doesn’t matter.”

There was no way a guy could sleep so defenselessly next to the man who had just attacked him. But strangely enough, Masamichi was relaxed, in both body and mind.

For some reason, Masamichi could feel his *energy* softly enveloping and gently seeping into Shino’s body.

It was very strange and peculiar, yet it wasn’t a bad experience.

*The meals that Shino cooks make my body healthy, and my energy fills Shino’s body. What do you call something like this? A food chain? No, it’s a bit different.*

As Masamichi’s thoughts wandered in that direction, sleep slowly overtook his consciousness.

*Oh, I didn’t ice his forehead. He might have a lump there tomorrow. I wonder*

*if specters get lumps. If they do, we'll have matching lumps.*

Imagining both of them with swollen faces the next day, the muscles in Masamichi's face relaxed, and he smiled and drifted off into a happy sleep.

\*

\*

It was past noon two days later when a customer came to Bougyoudou, the antique store that Shino operated.

Masamichi had just returned to the house when he saw a young man peeking inside the shop.

The stranger wore flashy satin sweats, a gold necklace, and gold sneakers. His hair was bleached almost to a silver that sparkled in the afternoon light.

"Uh, may I help you?" Masamichi asked.

The man did not look like he would be interested in antiques, but it wasn't right to judge a book by its cover. So Masamichi gently approached him, and the man jumped and spun around.

He held a large paper bag in his hand, printed with the name of a famous fashion brand.

"Oh, um, um, do you work here?"

Masamichi nodded. "Uh, yeah. Please come in."

"Sure, okay."

The man clenched and opened his free hand, then rubbed his palm over the thigh area of his pants. It appeared that his hands were sweaty.

*He seems kind of nervous.*

Suspicious, Masamichi examined the man's face. He had smooth, pale skin and blue-colored contacts, with eyebrows that were shaped perfectly like an anime character.

*Maybe he's a model or in showbiz,* Masamichi wondered as he reached to open the door, when the man gestured for him to stop and said in a low voice:

"I know it's silly to ask someone who works here, but is your guy really good?"

"Really good?"

Masamichi tilted his head.

Honestly, he couldn't tell how good Shino was with antiques.

*Though, I think he's great at identifying artifact spirits...and I don't know what this man wants.*

The man seemed impatient with Masamichi's hesitant attitude and lowered his voice another notch.

"Hey, I know the antique store is a front, and the guy's running a business for exorcising curses. I heard about it, went to a lot of trouble through various contacts, and finally got an appointment. Plus, I'm being charged a lot, so I want to be reassured. So how is he?"

"H-huh?!"

Masamichi didn't know what to say. As he stood there nervously, the door suddenly opened.

Shino had arrived.

Wearing a dark-gray jacket over a light-gray turtleneck shirt, he looked casual, subdued, yet elegant, and he approached the man with the same unfriendly look on his face as usual.

"You must be Mr. Takahashi. You have an appointment at one PM."

*Whoa! Shino called the man Mr. Takahashi!! Well, of course he'd use honorifics since this is a customer, but what a change!*

Next to Masamichi, who was moved, Takahashi looked at Shino warily.

"Don't tell me you're Shino Tatsumi? Are you that young? Or is Mr. Tatsumi in the back?"

"...Come in."

Shino politely invited the man to the back of the hallway.

"Whoa! It's dark! Narrow! Scary!"

Takahashi reacted as expected, but he appeared to have made up his mind to go through with this and headed toward the back of the store.

Masamichi whispered to Shino in a low voice so Takahashi wouldn't hear him.  
"Hi, Shino. I'll go upstairs so I won't get in your way..."

"Follow me. Keep quiet and watch the work that I do."

"O-oh, right. Yeah, I guess as a servant, I need to know what my master does."

"Precisely. Don't do anything without being told."

From there on, Shino quickly caught up to Takahashi as if he had forgotten about Masamichi. Masamichi followed the two men, sneezing despite having cleaned the place.

The long desk with the cash register also seemed to serve as a table for business discussions.

Shino sat across from Takahashi, who glanced curiously around the store, shaking his thin shoulders repeatedly as if to shrug away the creepiness.

Masamichi thought he should make tea for the customer, then he saw Shino eyeing him, an order to remain seated next to him in his gaze. He opted to sit on a stool diagonally behind Shino, close enough to hug the old cash register.

"All right, then."

Shino took out a leather business-card case from the inside pocket of his jacket, pulled out a card, and offered it to Takahashi. It was a perfect gesture that could have been recorded for a video on business etiquette.

*A specter is exchanging business cards with a human being. Shino...really does a professional job.*

Oblivious to Masamichi's renewed impression of him, Shino urged Takahashi to sit down. "Let's take a look," he said and sat.

"This is what I told you about on the phone."

Takahashi placed something from the large paper bag on the table.

Masamichi expected a brand-name item matching the logo on the bag, but it was a sweater—handmade and not very skillfully.

For some reason, Masamichi got goose bumps all over his body the moment he saw it. He did not know what it was, but he felt something strange rising

from the sweater like steam.

However, Takahashi didn't seem aware of it and began to talk.

"I work as a nightclub host, and this was a birthday present from a customer who had the hots for me. A hand-knit sweater is a little much, but I couldn't say 'no thanks,' so I accepted it and threw it away. But for some reason, it came back."

*It came back after he threw it away?*

Blinking, Masamichi listened to what Takahashi had to say.

"Whether I double-or triple-bag it or throw it away somewhere far from where I live, I find it laid out on my bed. Talk about weird. The girl who gave it to me ordered expensive liquor bottles to help boost my sales, but she got arrested for spending her company's money."

Shino folded his arms and closed his eyes without even nodding. Takahashi cringed uncomfortably and continued, "So she got probation, but her parents came for her and took her to their home, and that was the end of her ties to me. I'm not interested in customers who commit crimes... That's a big no from me, so I want to throw away this sweater for various reasons. I don't feel well when I have it in my home. I guess it's stress. Right?"

That was when Shino opened his eyes and glanced at Masamichi, who was startled by the meaningful look he gave him.

*This is what Shino said about people who aren't sensitive to the supernatural! Has the sweater put a curse on him? Is that why the man isn't well...? But maybe he doesn't realize what's going on here.*

Shino spoke to Takahashi in a blank, emotionless voice but was still polite.

"So what would you like me to do?"

"As I've been saying, having this revolting sweater around isn't good. What would a customer think if I brought them home and they saw it sitting on the bed? I want you to take it. That's what you do, right?"

Looking disgusted with the sweater, Takahashi used one finger to try to push the wrinkled heap toward Shino.



Shino said coldly, “Whether I can do as you wish depends on the price you’re willing to pay.”

“Oh yeah, that. What’s with this *price of life* you mentioned when I made my appointment? It’s too complicated, so here.” With a sly smile, Takahashi tossed a thick envelope from the paper bag in front of Shino. He watched expectantly as Shino extracted a thick wad of bills and placed it on the table’s edge. “Six hundred thousand yen. It isn’t as if I can’t pay more, but I don’t want to. This *price of life* or whatever is outrageous for you to take this sweater. Don’t hesitate to give me my change if you agree to a lower fee.”

Takahashi reached to take back part of the money, when Shino slapped his hand.

It was a casual move, but Takahashi let out a pathetic yelp.

“Ow!”

“How much did the woman—who was so into you that she even committed a crime and ruined her life—spend on you? I bet it wasn’t merely six hundred thousand yen,” Shino said sharply, and Takahashi’s eyes widened in surprise. All pretense of politeness was gone as the usual sarcastic sneer appeared on Shino’s face, and he continued, “But all right, I’ll give you six hundred thousand yen’s worth of a solution to your problem. You sit tight and be quiet.”

Shino was no longer treating Takahashi like a customer, and he waved his hands over the sweater.

Masamichi wanted to criticize Shino for his sudden arrogance, but Takahashi was overwhelmed by Shino’s peculiar actions and watched him suspiciously.

“Hey, is this for real? What are you, a magician? Ooh, those hands of yours look so cool. What’s the deal? Is it like, ‘one, two, three,’ and the sweater disappears?”

Ignoring Takahashi’s comments, Shino held up both palms of his hands and moved them slowly as if searching for something hidden in the sweater.

Masamichi sat behind Shino and stared.

*Oh, something’s coming out of Shino’s body...*

It was the *energy* that Shino had released when he saved Masamichi from that raging doll. It appeared again, making Shino's entire body shine a pale color.

*It's a beautiful silver light. It matches Shino. Bright, cold, and beautiful... It's like the moon.*

In contrast to Masamichi, who gawked at Shino, Takahashi laughed weirdly.

"Are you kidding? What a performance. Hey, I should do this at work. Maybe I'll get more customers— Whoa!!"

Takahashi's idle chatter was abruptly cut short by his cry of surprise.

As if beckoned by Shino's hand, the fluffy mohair sweater rose upright to its full size with both sleeves lifted.

Then the soft-looking sleeves wrapped themselves around Takahashi's chest as if a woman were embracing him.

"Aaahh!"

Screaming, Takahashi tried to stand, but Shino reached out and touched the young man's forehead with his index finger, immobilizing him as if he had glued the man to the chair he was on.

"I told you to sit tight and be quiet."

"Th-this is too much for a joke. You don't have to go this far to scare me."

Despite being frightened, Takahashi tried to pull the sweater away, when a woman's voice echoed through the store.

*"You told me you would quit the club and come live with me."*

"Aaahh!"

Takahashi screamed louder. Masamichi swallowed. The voice was coming from the sweater.

"B-but— Oh god."

*"But first, you said you wanted to be number one. Once you became that club's most popular host, you promised to quit and marry me. And...you begged me...! You said since I worked at a bank, I could get my hands on some money,*

*and you'd pay me back before they found out about it!"*

"Huh...? Wait, what is this?! Hey, do something...!!"

The sweater wrapped itself tightly—or rather, squeezed—around Takahashi's torso, and he croaked for help.

Shino responded in an icy tone, "That sweater is filled with the overwhelming emotions of the woman who made it. It has become a sort of living spirit and contains a part of her heart. If her attachment to you is that strong, it will return to you even if you were to throw it over the edge of the world. You must have dumped her in a terrible way."

The sweater let out a screeching, urgent female voice as if responding to Shino's words.

*"You said you'd take good care of me and the sweater I gave you...! And now you're bragging that a woman once loved you so much that she became a criminal...! While you flirt with other women."*

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I give up! Hey, is this really a live spirit? Quick, do something!"

Takahashi screamed and called out to Shino for help, but Shino completely ignored him and turned to Masamichi.

"Perhaps the woman has forgotten that she left the darkest part of her soul with the sweater. That's fortunate for her."

"...So you're saying that what's lodged in the sweater is a part of the person's heart? The person who made it, and her bitterness, hatred, and...grief? Have those emotions been cut off from her heart and become the soul of the sweater?" Masamichi asked.

"You're getting the hang of this," Shino said, nodding in satisfaction. "It's a different demon from an artifact spirit, but the woman gave up her attachment and pursuit of the man in order to protect her soul after he cruelly abandoned her. She let those emotions dwell in this sweater, which longs to be with him. It's obsessed with the man and hates him so much that it wants to kill him. Leave it like this, and the sweater will continue to squeeze the man until it crushes his lungs."

“...This isn’t the time...to be...amazed!”

Two dull, unpleasant cracking sounds came from Takahashi’s back. He screamed and contorted his body in agony.

Unable to get up from his chair, he couldn’t escape the sweater, which was clutching him with abnormal strength. It was a living hell.

“It sounds like both arms have been broken. Now that must hurt. But it’s only a momentary pain compared with the pain the woman experienced. You. Do you...understand that?”

Screeching pathetically, Takahashi nodded vigorously.

“Do you sincerely apologize to the woman who knit this sweater from the bottom of your heart? Will you live the rest of your life with the woman’s sin as your sin? Do you vow sincerely to do that?”

*Crack, crack, crack...*

The sound of the man’s ribs breaking echoed in the room, and the man was in such terrible pain that he could barely speak, but he managed a reply.

“Yes...I...vow...to...do...that!”

The man nodded frantically, and Shino told him with ice in his voice, “Don’t forget that promise. You hear that, poor piece of the woman’s heart?”

Shino reached across the table and patted the sweater with one hand as it held on to the man’s body as if trying to consume her beloved.

“Return to where you belong and tell your heart that your bitterness has pierced deep into and taken root in this man’s body. Should he break his promise, his body will immediately be torn into eight pieces.”

“Urk?!!”

Takahashi’s bloodshot eyes widened when he heard the dangerous words that came out of Shino’s mouth; clearly, he had been expecting him to help.

Unfazed, Shino stroked the misshapen sleeves of the sweater gently and spoke to it as if to reason with it.

“Your work is done. This man is not worth a piece of your soul. Reunite with

your heart and live out the rest of your days together. Now...go!”

As soon as Shino raised his dignified voice, the sweater lost its power and fell to the floor.

It was now just a piece of clothing, and Shino pointed at it.

“Pick it up. And leave this place with it. The sweater is proof of your oath. If you fail to live up to your oath, your life will end.”

Takahashi was stunned.

“Huh...? But...I...”

“You should be able to move now.”

“...Huh?!”

Takahashi looked incredulous and gently moved his hands. Both arms, which should have been broken, could move freely somehow.

This surprised Masamichi.

“Shino, what just happened?”

“I used my power to show the woman’s living spirit inhabiting the sweater an illusion. The spirit left, satisfied that it had fully hurt this man. It will not return.”

“Wow, that’s true. I can move,” Takahashi said, stunned. He gingerly picked up the sweater with two fingers after it had fallen helplessly to the floor. Shino’s face contorted to see him handle it as if touching something filthy.

“The curse I spoke of is real. I needed some commitment to make the living spirit leave.”

“...But...my body being torn into eight pieces? That couldn’t possibly happen.”

“Don’t forget it. If you do, you will surely die. Seeing your body suddenly twisted and torn into eight pieces on the street will be sensational. It will be the spectacle of a lifetime.”

The young man’s relief was short-lived. And when the dreaded pronouncement was made, Takahashi’s face turned whiter than his bleached hair.

“Hey, I—I paid for this. Why do I have to go through something like that?”

“I said I’d do six hundred thousand yen’s worth of work. You’re lucky you aren’t already dead. Every time you see that sweater, remember your sins and stay true to your word. Do that, and you will live a long life. It’s that simple.”

At Shino’s cold words, Takahashi put the sweater on his lap and sat there for a while, looking as though he had been drained...

Masamichi escorted Takahashi out, the young man seeming battered and walking with a wobbly, ghostly gait. Then Masamichi called out to Shino, who had returned to the tea room.

“I wonder if he’ll make it home okay. I wonder if he can keep his vow for the rest of his life.”

Shino sat down in front of the low table and shrugged. “That isn’t my concern. He’ll die if he can’t keep his promise. That’s all there is to it.”

“Well...yeah, but I’m worried,” he said with a sigh. “Anyway...so Shino, you don’t just deal with artifact spirits,” Masamichi noted as he poured water into the iron kettle. “You also exorcise spirits, huh?”

“A good customer asked me to help him, and I had no choice but to accept. I don’t usually do things like that.”

“I see. Well, in any case, good job.”

Masamichi believed that the law should judge people who committed crimes. But it was true that people like Takahashi made others commit crimes for their benefit and lived without guilt.

Shino punished him and set things up so he would live with his sins for the rest of his life.

*That seems a good thing to do, but...the man will die by his body being ripped apart if he breaks his word, which might be going a bit too far. But wait. I made that commitment, too.*

Masamichi recalled the *contract* he had agreed to with Shino. He thought about its seriousness and shivered.

Then Shino asked him a question, looking as if he had already forgotten about

Takahashi.

“So have you finished making the arrangements?”

“Oh yeah! Right! I have!”

Masamichi heated the iron kettle and quickly returned to the tea room.

He sat up straight before Shino, placed his hands on the tatami mat, and bowed his head.

“I’ve completed the admission procedures for the prep school. Uh...thank you so much for letting me go. I promise I’ll pay you back one day.”

Masamichi had been visiting a famous prep school near the nearest train station that day.

When Shino heard that Masamichi had failed his university entrance examination for two consecutive years after studying alone, he insisted that Masamichi enroll at a prep school, saying, “*You should have a professional teach you the basics,*” and giving him the necessary money for enrollment.

“You don’t have to pay me back. Don’t make me keep repeating the same thing.”

Shino frowned disapprovingly at Masamichi’s gratitude. Masamichi looked up and retorted, both hands still on the tatami.

“You’ve been so good to me. I can’t ask you to pay for my prep school on top of that.”

“I thought I said that as my servant, I would provide you food, clothing, and shelter.”

“A prep school isn’t food, clothing, or shelter...”

“Tokifuyu said knowledge is like a garment that colors the soul of the one who possesses it. Thus, it can be interpreted as being included in food, clothing, and shelter.”

Surprised, Masamichi sat up straight.

“Your late master said that?”

Shino nodded.

*“He who has acquired wide and varied knowledge will clothe his soul with colorful garments. The soul of one who has devoted himself to one path will be adorned in a robe of deep colors. The ignorant one will be bare-chested and unashamed. Now, Shino, what kind of robe will your soul wear in the future?”*

Shino was probably imitating his master as he said that.

“The type of robe my soul is clothed in... I’d like to let Tokifuyu see me now. It’s probably a dark color painted by a thousand years in solitude.”

*Oh, here he goes again.*

Masamichi had noticed that Shino spoke in a somewhat old-fashioned way when discussing the past. Perhaps memories of his late master were now lingering in his mind.

*The other day, Shino told me how Tokifuyu mistreated him...but I think he likes his late master despite that.*

Masamichi wasn’t about to say that out loud, but Shino seemed to take on a slightly mellow look when he talked about Tokifuyu.

*I’d like to learn more about Shino and Tokifuyu in the near future.*

“A servant who fails to learn is a disgrace to his master. So study,” Shino said, breaking Masamichi’s thoughts.

Then he looked at Masamichi’s face and sharpened his tone.

“Hey, speaking of food, clothing, and shelter, what is with that messy hair?”

“Huh?! Oh. Um.”

Masamichi touched a hand to his black hair, looking awkward.

For more than a year after moving out of his parents’ house, Masamichi had been put off by the city’s fashionable atmosphere, with its beauty salons and expensive goods, so he had hesitated to go out and get a haircut. He had resorted to using the small mirror attached to the washstand in his apartment and snipping away.

He had never cut anyone’s hair before, so the back side must have looked terrible. He’d pretended not to notice it, but finally, Shino had pointed it out.



“I’ll call my hairdresser later and make an appointment. Go do something about it tomorrow.”

Masamichi’s eyes widened when Shino said that like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“You go to a beauty salon?!”

“My hair grows because Tokifuyu gave me this elaborate human form.”

Masamichi, whose mouth had been hanging open, burst out laughing as Shino fiddled in annoyance with his lightly wavy chestnut-colored hair.

Shino grumbled, “What’s so funny?”

“Oh, n-nothing. I’m glad to learn things about you that I didn’t know. I’ll ask the people at the beauty salon for more information about you.”

“Don’t go the extra mile.”

“I’m not. A servant must find out all he can about his master, right?”

Masamichi got to his feet.

And before Shino could start complaining again, the young man ran to the kitchen to remove the iron kettle from the burner.

## EPILOGUE

Sleeping in his bed late that night, Masamichi woke suddenly when he heard a clattering noise.

“Wh-what was that?”

Abruptly waking from a deep sleep must have made him mildly confused.

He jumped out of bed, reached with his right hand to turn on the light, then came to his senses and smacked himself on the head.

“What a dummy. It’s already been two weeks since I moved here.”

Before moving in with Shino, Masamichi had lived in an old apartment from the Showa era that had the feel of a historical preserved site.

The rent was extremely low, but it was six tatami mats in size with a shared bathroom, sink, kitchen, and no bath. The walls had been paper-thin. Masamichi had always been tiptoeing around the room because the occupants of the next room seemed to be right next to him when they coughed.

From the old light attached to his former room’s ceiling hung a long string a previous tenant must have set up.

Laying out a mattress on the tatami mat, he could easily turn on the light by reaching up and pulling that string.

Although everything had been old, that was the one thing that had been handy.

The string probably came from the wrapping on a box of sweets. It was thin, durable, and made of resin, which wasn’t often seen these days.

Masamichi’s chest tingled as he recalled the sensation of the string swinging with the slightest movement and the knots along it serving as handholds.

*Maybe Shino gave me longer fingers, but I still remember how it felt. I'm glad. Well, I always wanted to move out soon, but what is this? I'm getting a little nostalgic about my old apartment.*

While Masamichi wondered about those emotions, he listened intently.

*Clatter...! Thud.*

The noise wasn't loud, but it could continuously be heard from the hallway. It sounded like a person was doing something...like perhaps opening and closing a drawer with a poor locking mechanism.

*Don't tell me we're being robbed?*

The thought occurred to Masamichi, but there was no way that Shino and his acute sensory perceptions wouldn't notice.

*That means Shino's making that sound. He's likely working in the store. He can probably focus better if I'm not there.*

With that, Masamichi lay on his bed again.

He tried to close his eyes and sleep, but it was tough when he was curious about what was happening in the hall.

"Oh, geez."

Unable to stand it any longer, Masamichi finally got out of bed.

He put on a cardigan that'd been spread out on the bed and left the room, stepping barefoot on the cool, slippery tatami mat.

Knowing Shino, it was pointless for Masamichi to try to be quiet. And no matter how quietly he walked, the steep old stairs made a *creak-creak* sound.

As Masamichi stepped into the tea room, Shino, who had his back to him as he did something at the low table, said gruffly without even looking at him:

"Go to sleep."

The frosty tone would have frightened Masamichi at first. But he had learned during these two weeks that Shino wasn't actually mad.

*I know now that gruffness is Shino's default tone.*

Rather than being scared, he was happy that Shino hadn't ignored him and said honestly, "I was asleep, but I woke up 'cause of all the noise."

Masamichi had never uttered a line like that since it could be taken as a rude accusation depending on whom he was talking to. Masamichi had always been careful of others and never said what he wanted to say. But now things were different. If he didn't express his feelings honestly, *his master* would scold him.

At first, Masamichi dreaded the thought that he might spoil Shino's mood or be too ill-mannered, but being honest was more exhilarating than Masamichi had expected.

He was happy to be able to express his feelings in words, and he even felt that he might have become a little tougher.

"I know this area is directly beneath my room, but still, the noise was pretty loud."

Shino didn't respond as expected, and Masamichi continued, "Is it work? I'll go back to my room if I'd distract you, but I'd like to watch if it's okay with you. Want me to make tea?"

Wordlessly, Shino shrugged and went back to work.

A small dimple appeared on Masamichi's cheek.

In Shino's case, he was honest and didn't mind if Masamichi stayed in the room—or else he'd tell him to get out. And the man was sure to be a little thirsty if he didn't outright reject Masamichi's offer.

Masamichi boiled water in the tiny kitchen and made *hojicha* green tea. Then he placed two teacups on a small tray and took it to the low table.

"Here you go. I'll put it over here so it doesn't interfere with your work."

Masamichi placed the teacups on the table, set a cushion a few feet away from Shino, and sat down.

Shino appeared to be assembling an object that had been shattered into pieces.

Full of interest, Masamichi glanced at his hands.

“Is that the object you went out and bought?”

“No. It was among the old tools I took in bulk.”

“In that sorry state?”

Masamichi tilted his head in question, and Shino anxiously pushed out his chin.

“It was in a drawer of that tea chest.”

“Oh, I see. Maybe the owner put it there after it broke and forgot about it.”

“How it happened is none of my business,” Shino said curtly, but he carefully put the fragments together using semitransparent mending tape. It was frighteningly intricate work.

“That really is broken into pieces—maybe twenty or so?”

Not worrying about Shino, whose silence meant the affirmative, Masamichi looked excited.

“What will this be when you put everything together? You’ve finished the base. Going by the size, maybe a teacup? Or a rice bowl?”

Shino shoved two pieces in front of Masamichi.

“Attach these and secure them.”

“Huh?! You don’t mind letting me do it?”

“Even an innocent child could do this.”

“Really? With my bare hands?”

“No problem. It isn’t some elaborate antique.”

“Oh, okay.”

Masamichi carefully held a fragment in each hand and gently tried to match the cross sections.

The two pieces fit together perfectly, and the glazed mouth of the object was contoured and slightly pointed like a beak.

“Huh?!”

Masamichi noticed that and twisted his head.

“I expected a curve, but it’s a bit pointed. Is this right?”

“It’s a lipped cup,” Shino said.

“Lipped? Oh, wait, I’ll search that.”

He felt bad about asking Shino everything, so he put the pieces on the table and searched for *lipped cup* on his phone.

“Ah, a lipped cup has a pointed end, making it easy to pour liquids.”

Shino blinked to convey the affirmative.

“The parts I just stuck together form the lip of this item. You said a child could do this, but it’s tough. It slips out of place,” Masamichi whined.

He matched the cross sections of the pieces and carefully fastened them with a bit of mending tape.

“It simply means you’re clumsier than a child.”

“Ngh. There’s nothing I can say to that.”

Somehow managing to paste the pieces together, Masamichi placed them in front of Shino and watched in awe as he connected the small pieces effortlessly.

“It’s pretty much done. But what will you do with it after you combine the pieces and re-create the original? It won’t be good enough to use or display with sticky tape all over it...will it?” Masamichi asked.

Shino set down the lip he was working on and reached for his teacup. He swallowed the hot *hojicha* without blowing on it and said, “I’ll connect the parts.”

“Huh?!”

“I’ll use lacquer to join them, then sprinkle it with gold dust.”

“Oh, are you talking about *kintsugi*? I’ve heard of it for mending broken objects. I didn’t know you could do it for things that’ve been smashed to pieces like this.”

“It does take time and effort. Many processes are involved when it’s this

badly broken. I give each part a number, shave off the edges, attach them with a paste of lacquer and wheat flour, and fill the gaps using another type of lacquer. It also takes several weeks of drying for each step of the process.”

“It already sounds like a lot of work, but you can do that, Shino?”

Shino laid a finger on Masamichi’s forehead to push him away and returned to what he was doing.

“Naturally. The previous owner of this store taught me. I learned it thinking it was a good way to kill time, but it’s turned out to be quite useful.”

“Oh yeah, the previous owner... Daizo, right? Antique dealers can do things like that, huh?”

“It would depend on the individual. Daizo accepted broken vessels, administered *kintsugi*, and sold them at low prices.”

“Ah. That’s recycling.”

“An item may be chipped and lose its value as an antique, but that doesn’t detract from the quality of the vessel. Repaired correctly, its charm will increase. By obtaining and using such an item daily, he said I should develop an eye for identifying fine items and learn the joy of using beautiful things.”

Shino said that with his usual cool and matter-of-fact tone.

But Masamichi smiled. Shino would never admit it, but every word he said seemed imbued with a fondness for the previous owner.

“What’s there to laugh about?”

Quick to notice Masamichi’s expression, Shino raised his shapely eyebrows. Still smiling, Masamichi said, “I never met them, but I think Daizo and his wife, Yoriko, must have been lovely people.”

“I don’t understand the idea of *lovely*, but they were a good-natured couple. They were overjoyed when I came to them, not realizing that I was a specter, and said it was like their deceased son had returned to them. What if they knew what I was?”

A sarcastic smile crossed Shino’s thin lips, but Masamichi flatly denied what he was about to say.

“It wouldn’t have made any difference if they knew.”

When Masamichi gave an unusually direct retort, Shino spoke in an unpleasant, cutting tone. “Are you saying these humans would have loved a specter as their own?”

There was a grimness in Shino’s voice that suggested he would be angry with another push, but Masamichi wasn’t intimidated. He felt that this was something he should say to Shino.

“Why not? Dogs, cats, and birds become *your child* when you live with them. After living under the same roof, eating meals together, chatting, and sharing various memories, I think they would have called you *their own*, regardless of whether you were a specter.”

Shino leaned forward lightly, seemingly intrigued for the first time.

“Do humans consider beasts their children?”

“Beasts...? Let’s call them animals. Hey, it doesn’t even have to be an animal.”

“What?”

“For example, a friend bought a motorbike with the money he saved and called it his beloved. And someone I knew who was in the Japanese archery club called her bow her sweetie.”

Shino’s brow furrowed, making shallow vertical wrinkles. He grunted and said, “I don’t know,” as he held a small piece in each hand. “Many people indeed have a heart for things. Because of their strong attachment, their feelings turn things into artifact spirits. I am well aware of that, but I never thought they would go so far as to consider things *their* beloved. So, Masamichi, do you have such an item as well?”

Masamichi thought it over and shook his head vaguely.

“He wasn’t mine, but a dog my relatives who lived nearby had is still like a big brother to me. I was an only child, and it was nice to have that big dog protecting me at my side.”

“A stepbrother.”

“Yeah. I don’t know how the dog felt about me, but... Oh yeah. That dog...”



Masamichi started saying something, then suddenly covered his mouth.

Shino had been calling him to his room several times, and they had been sleeping side by side. Those nights reminded Masamichi of the naps he'd taken at his relatives' house, snuggling up with that big dog, and his sense of comfort and security. Masamichi wanted to tell Shino that, but he wasn't likely to be happy to hear it.

"What is it?" Shino questioned.

"Oh, nothing. So...are you going to use *kintsugi* on this item and sell it cheap?"

Masamichi forcefully redirected the topic to what they had been discussing, and although Shino looked a little doubtful, he didn't comment on the change. He just answered saying, "No, I'm not selling it cheap."

"Huh?!"

"This item was a favorite of its owner. The emotions aren't so strong as to create an artifact spirit, but I can still feel the owner's attachment to it."

"Unfortunately, I can't sense that, but you're right."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Because it was their favorite, they couldn't throw it away after it broke into pieces like this, and they kept it in a drawer. That's what I would have done."

"I see. Human nonsense is incomprehensible. I don't understand it, and I don't intend to try."

"I know it's pointless, but...why is that a reason not to sell it at a discount?"

In response to Masamichi's simple question, Shino tried to explain in a tone that suggested it was just common sense.

"An object a human has loved wishes to remain with that individual. The attachment is positive. If the new owner treats the item carefully, it will bring more positive energy."

"You're saying it will bring good luck to its new owner?"

"You're starting to understand things a little."

Shino lifted the corners of his mouth a notch, then lowered the object after

finishing it halfway.

“Treated roughly, this object may bring unexpected retribution, but as long as its owner takes good care of it, it will be a good omen. It is only natural that they pay accordingly.”

“I see. I guess you think differently from the previous proprietor. But you’re just like him. You bring new life to broken things and find new owners for them.”

“Perhaps.”

“I know I’m right.”

Masamichi nodded, drank some *hojicha*, which had cooled, and started to get up.

“Okay. I shouldn’t stay here and be in your way all night, so I’m going to bed.”

Without even saying, “Do what you want,” Shino went back to work.

No longer concerned by the lack of a response, Masamichi said good night for the second time, rinsed out the teacups, and left the room.

He slowly went up the steep staircase with a smile on his face.

*If I said he’s doing a really painstaking job, he’d say it’s because the item would sell at a higher price, which may be true. But the attention he puts into his work shows his kindness.*

Rubbing the handrail, polished smooth from years of being touched by human hands, Masamichi continued his musings.

*Shino said specters don’t have emotions. They don’t have feelings of kindness or love. If that’s the case, then his late master and the late proprietor of this place and his wife must have been the ones who taught him kindness. I would have liked to have met them.*

Masamichi’s chest felt warm.

Those modest feelings of happiness seemed to have made him sleepy, and he yawned loudly as soon as he opened the door to his room and crawled back into bed.

## On Publishing *The Contract Between a Specter and a Servant*

This work is a full rewrite of the *Me, an Apparition, and Him, a Servant* series published by Az Novels, East Press, in 2002.

I thought it best to tell you why a rewrite was necessary for restarting the series.

Az Novels was discontinued after releasing the ninth installment of the series in 2013, and the opportunity to publish subsequent chapters was gone.

Other publishers offered to continue or reissue the series. However, the project fell through due to a publishing slump, the large number of volumes already published, and my reluctance to compromise, and the series remained in limbo until a few years ago.

During that time, I received many reader requests for more, but I couldn't fulfill their wishes, and my heartache continued for a long time.

And on this occasion, the Kadokawa Bunko editorial department approached me. East Press—the original publisher—readily agreed, and I was able to rewrite the work you've just read.

Yes, it's a rewrite.

In publishing the Kadokawa Bunko paperback version, my editor and I discussed and decided on a few things.

One was to keep the e-book version of *Me, an Apparition, and Him, a Servant*, still published by East Press, as it stood.

This was a strong request from East Press and something I also ardently wanted.

I didn't want to pretend that the original version of Shino and Masamichi's days together, which many readers have loved over the years, never happened, even if they were unfinished.

I am extremely grateful to the people at East Press for making it possible for us to see Shino and Masamichi here at any time.

One more thing. The *Specter and Servant* series was published by a label specializing in *yaoi*, where the basic theme is Boys Love or love between males. But I have never categorized my work as such, and like my other work, this is a story about *someone developing feelings for another during their daily lives and nurturing a strong mutual bond*.

In rewriting the work, I had no desire to change the relationship between Shino and Masamichi. The series, however, had initially been intended to be stand-alone, so I get the sense that I had fast-forwarded their relationship and written a digest version.

I'm an individual who loves, more than anything else, the process of someone meeting someone else, them recognizing each other as irreplaceable, and bringing their souls together—so much so that I could call myself a “relationship nerd.” That's why, when I found out that the series was going to be long, I thought, *Darn, I didn't have to speed things along so much*.

If I could go back to the beginning and weave the story again, I'd want to give Shino and Masamichi plenty of time to build and cement a bond that only these two could create.

I also wanted to illustrate what went on in Shino's mind. For that, I wanted to tell the story in the third person this time, rather than Masamichi's first person.

That was my other fervent wish for the rewrite.

I was encouraged and happier than anything that my editor agreed with me.

I want to stay in line with their fundamental relationship in the original. At the same time, I also hope to show Shino and Masamichi's days together the way that I now want and can carefully write today.

Perhaps *The Contract Between a Specter and a Servant*, Vol. 1 is a little different from what those of you who have long supported the series expected. Even so, I would like to express my heartfelt hope that you'll be patient and give it a chance.

I hope that those of you who have come across this work for the first time will take the time to enjoy the strange but adorable twosome.

The title may have changed, but the series nickname *Specter and Servant* remains the same. I hope with all my heart that it will become your favorite story.

*With many thanks,*

*Michiru Fushino*

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