





# THE CONTRACT BETWEEN A SPECTER AND A SERVANT

Michiru Fushino



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Michiru Fushino

Illustration by Aki Aoi



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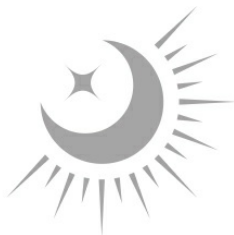
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# CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1    Proper and Improper Encounters

Chapter 2    Sounds Rising to Heaven

Chapter 3    An Ache in Her Heart

Chapter 4    Threads Tangled Together

Chapter 5    Payback

Epilogue

Yen Newsletter



Prologue

Chapter 1    Proper and Improper Encounters

Chapter 2    Sounds Rising to Heaven

Chapter 3    An Ache in Her Heart

Chapter 4    Threads Tangled Together

Chapter 5    Payback

Epilogue

# THE CONTRACT BETWEEN A SPECTER<sup>AND</sup> A SERVANT



## CHARACTERS

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

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

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**Bougyoudou** The antique store that Shino operates.

Spirits reside within its wares.



## PROLOGUE

A cold night wind rustled the sparse treetops.

The withered blades of grass that covered the ground made a sound like the whispered recitations of an old woman.

A narrow crescent moon shone feebly over an empty field.

It may be incorrect to say that nothing was on the field.

What at first appeared to be large stones strewn on the dry ground were actually human skulls, and the sticks on the ground were the bones of their limbs.

A skinny dog carefully grasped a flat bone between its teeth—soggy, decaying flesh hung from the bone.

This desolate place was on the outskirts of the ancient capital, Kyoto. It was a place of burial where they dumped the corpses of commoners who would never be buried in cemeteries. Cherry blossom petals drifted on the wind, falling one by one on the white bones scattered everywhere.

“Oh, how beautiful,” muttered a young man in a singsong voice.

He wore a pure white *kariginu*, the informal robes worn by nobility during the Heian period. And his long, glossy black hair hung down his back, gathered in a loose ponytail.

His pale face was oval shaped, and his eyes and nose looked like strokes from a soft paintbrush. It was more appropriate to describe his face as fresh and cool rather than to call him a beauty.

“The barren moon, the exposed skulls, the cherry blossoms, and my robe. They are all white but in slightly different shades. Very interesting,” the man said happily. He walked carefully so as not to trip on his loose *hakama* trousers

while avoiding the skulls around him. His fingertips peeked out from beneath his long sleeves, moving rhythmically as if he was keeping time.

Though he was dressed like a noble, the sight of the man wandering around late at night without a single light or attendant was eerie, no matter how happy and carefree he might have looked.

Even in a lonely place like this, people came to make a small fortune by looting what little clothing and possessions they could from the abandoned corpses.

A few of them followed the man for a few minutes but eventually disappeared.

The fear that the man might be a phantom of some kind apparently outweighed the temptation to rob the human remains.

The man seemed oblivious to their concerns, appearing to be enjoying a spring evening stroll when, suddenly, he stopped.

With gentle hands, he picked up a skull by his feet, cradled it to his chest, stroked its gentle slope as if petting a puppy, and smiled softly.

“All right, those pesky humans are finally gone. Now I can watch the moon in peace. I prefer tonight’s thin and frail-looking crescent moon to a full moon, but what about you, Lord of the Wilderness?”

The man addressed the darkness before him in a place where nothing but wreckage and wild dogs roamed.

*Whoosh.*

One would have expected no more response than a chilly breeze, but that was not the case.

*“You call me the lord? If you’re trying to be sarcastic, it is not resonating with me. Or have you come to curry favor with me, spiritual medium? You must do better if you wish to beg for your life.”*

A low, strangely distorted voice rang out, cutting through the night air.

At the same time, a tremendous wind blew and swirled around the man as if to engulf him. Grains of sand were whipped up by the wind like a small tornado

and slammed into his body.

“Oops.”

The man referred to as a spiritual medium only staggered a bit.

Promptly regaining his balance, he smiled at the wind that should have prevented him from opening his eyes. While holding his *eboshi*—a silk headgear worn by court nobles—with one hand, he muttered, “Well, this isn’t a very warm welcome.”

When the wind stopped, there was a dog—or rather, a wolf—the size of a small mountain in front of the man.

Its silver fur stood on end, and pale flames rose from the tips of its coat. Its sharp claws dug firmly into the ground, and its long, thin snout was marked with several deep wrinkles that indicated displeasure.

Long fangs peeked out from the slightly open mouth, and the rough breath it blew on the man stank of rotting flesh and blood.

The man raised his eyebrows slightly at the stench but showed no fear as he quietly brushed off the dust from his robe.

“I have nothing to throw away nor anything I would regret losing. I will not go to the trouble of begging for my life. You are indeed the lord of this land. You are probably a demon born of the stagnant souls of the dead here and their unquenchable bitterness and remorse.”

Then he glanced down at the skull in his hand, looked around, and opened his mouth again.

“You ate the other demons, attacked and ate passersby, and have even left this place to attack and eat humans who live on the outskirts of the city...and thus acquired the power you now possess.”

“So what?”

“I am sure that you have been sneaking into the city and committing acts of violence when you find a crack in the barrier between our worlds. You have now become a threat, even to the human capital. The Bureau of Spiritual Mediums should have neutralized you. They underestimated your power and

stood idly by while you did *this*. It is deplorable.”

The beastly spirit growled. It was not a friendly sound. It was a sound tinged with contempt.

*“Hey, spiritual medium, I am not here to listen to your nonsense. Who do you think you are? Have you not come to neutralize me like all the others before you? I’m sure you’re aware that I ate them alive.”*

Before the apparition finished speaking, it lunged toward the man and barked fiercely, inches away from the man’s nose.

Though it made the night air tremble, the man did not fear the chilling sound.

“Of course I know. And therefore, I have not come here to fight you.”

The beast narrowed its red eyes.

*“Then why are you here?”*

The man turned his gaze away from the beast and toward the night sky.

“It is a beautiful night, so I came to enjoy a stroll. And I thought I would try to reason with you if we ran into each other.”

*“...What? You, a mere human, wish to reason with me?”*

The man’s willow leaf–shaped eyes stared at the apparition, and he nodded.

“Yes, that is correct. You understand the human language. Because of that, we can exchange words as we are doing now, and I can reason with you.”

*“Hah. How foolish. I understand the human language because I was born from the souls of the dead. I am not interested in speaking with humans.”*

“But you seem to have a taste for observing humans. You have been watching me for some time now, and your gaze made my skin tingle,” the man said with a hint of a smile.

The specter responded mockingly, *“You looked so carefree as you traipsed about; I wondered if I had finally consumed all the skilled humans and only fools like you remained. I was astounded.”*

The man didn’t seem offended by being called a fool and responded blithely, “I am indeed called a dim man at the bureau, so I suppose that is true. So now

you have appeared before this fool. What are you going to do?"

*"I do not need to answer that. Regardless of your incompetence, you are still a spiritual medium. I will gain more power by eating you than I would by eating a mere mortal."*

The beast slowly licked its lips. The long blue-black tongue was so close that it almost touched the man's nose.

"You plan to obtain mystical power and break into the capital, which is protected by another barrier?" Still holding the skull in his arms, the man asked calmly, "Why do you so wish to take revenge on the capital?"

The specter answered immediately in a tone that said the answer was obvious.

*"Human flesh and blood taste good. Consuming it fortifies my body. The spiritual mediums who came to neutralize me tasted better than the skinny mortals around here. Those living in the city are fat, even more so in the capital. Besides, I hear there are many beautiful women with long hair there. The flesh of a graceful woman would be more tender and delicious than that of a man, and their screams would be deafeningly loud. Rather than simply tear one apart and eat them, it would be a treat to rape and devour a crying woman."*

The man's eyebrows furrowed at the specter's horrifying description of his desire. But there was pity, not disgust, in his eyes.

"Having heard that, I cannot let you eat me. I cannot allow you to obtain such power."

*"But you have no choice. You can fight me all you want, but you will never beat me."*

"I suppose you're right. I never believed I could defeat you in the first place."

*"Then what are you going to do, foolish medium? Whether you like it or not, I will now eat you!"*

As if to show off its strength, the demon opened its large jaws and let out a single howl. It stretched out its front legs and raised its hindquarters, and the man could see its whole body gathering the strength to pounce on him. The



blue-white flames the beast's body emitted soared into the night sky.

Heat and the nauseating stench of decay enveloped the man's body.

Still, the man just looked sad and then pressed the front of the skull he held against his own forehead.

"I cannot win by fighting you. Therefore..."

*"Brace yourself, medium!"*

"I will defeat you with strategy," the man proclaimed in a dignified voice as his pure white sleeves fluttered in the air.

He mercilessly tossed the skull, and it drew a large arc in the air, then stopped above the beast's head. But nothing else happened. It only floated there in the night sky.

The demon scoffed at the man's feeble resistance, flexed its body like a bow, and attacked.

The man's head should have been bitten off his torso in less than a second.

However.

The beast's thick hind legs became immobile as if sewn to the ground, and it could not move.

*"What?!"*

The specter twisted its head to look at its hind legs and exclaimed in surprise.

The skull the man had thrown earlier still spun slowly over its head. The beast had not realized that countless other skulls were gathering around it as if the one overhead was calling out to its friends.

The skulls rattled their jaws and clacked their few remaining teeth as they covered the beast's hind legs, preventing the apparition from bending its joints. Its legs were now nothing more than thick pillars.

*"My god... You bastard!!"*

"I told you I would defeat you with strategy. While you were observing me with overconfidence and mockery, I was roaming around this hill area of Toribeno, casting spells on every skull I could see."

As the man spoke, he intricately intertwined his fingers under his long sleeves and formed several hand seals.

“Gather around, skulls, and bind this pathetic beast.”

Like a swarm of beetles converging on a corpse, the skulls gathered upon the beast, overlapping with one another, biting and interlocking among themselves and covering the beast’s huge body in no time.

Each skull may have been lightweight, but the power of numbers should not be underestimated. Despite the beast’s desperate struggle to rise, he was crushed by the mountain of skulls and finally fell to the ground.

*“Bastard...! What a sly thing to do.”*

The beast was now forced to crawl on the ground and looked up at the man with pure hatred in his eyes.

The man laughed softly, patted the skull he had been holding to his chest when it returned to him, and carefully took it to join the mountain of other skulls.

“This is what it means to prevail by the wiles of the weak. Have you learned the power of the wisdom you do not have?”

The beast continued to wriggle, but the mountain of skulls did not budge.

*“All right,”* it said. *“A win is a win, regardless of whether it was by a stupid scheme. You have beaten me. Cut off this head of mine and be proud of your victory,”* the beast spat arrogantly, exhaling a burning breath and snarling in frustration.

The man chuckled. “I will do no such thing,” he said.

A hint of confusion appeared in the beast’s bewitching crimson eyes for the first time.

*“What? What do you intend to do?”*

“I cannot explain it in a few words. But I have not given up on reasoning with you. For that purpose...yes. First, I will make you mine.”

A hissing sound escaped the beast’s throat. It was the first time it had felt fear

since being born out of the darkness.

It was the first time that the specter, which had devoured the fears of others as a strange delicacy, felt horrified.

*“What in the world are you saying?”*

The man thought for a few seconds, then gently placed his right index finger on the brow of the unmoving specter.

“You have been the ruler of this wilderness until this moment. I give you the name *Shino*—meaning *rule the wild*. It is a good name, if I do say so myself. It suits you.”

*“You...you dare try to tie me down with a name?!”*

“Yes, I am. I have just become your master. I need a name to call you if you are my servant.”

*“Your servant? Are you saying you will make me serve as your familiar?”*

The man smiled gently and nodded.

“You catch on fast. You really are a smart lad—*Shino*. That is your name. With this name, I bind you, and with this name, I shall embrace you with compassion.”

The specter gritted its teeth. Blue-black body fluid dripped from the edge of its black mouth. It sizzled strangely the moment it hit the ground, and the unpleasant smell of burning hair rose.

*“I do not need...compassion! Kill me! Or I will kill you!”*

Although the beast’s angry voice sounded like the roar of a wild animal, the man remained unfazed.

“You will understand someday that compassion is a good thing. But first, I must teach you patience, as I do not care to be caught by surprise.”

*“Wh-what are you going to do to me?”*

The man put a little pressure on his fingertips, which were still placed upon the beast’s brow, and just like that, the huge, supposedly strong wolf screamed pitifully in agony.

“First, I am taking away much of your power. Next, I will prepare a vessel worthy of my servant and seal your soul within. Initially, it may feel a little cramped, but you will soon get used to it. I will put my skills to the test and prepare a fine vessel for you. No need to be so anxious.”

Even as the man spoke as calmly as one would expect of small talk, a golden glow emanated from his fingertips.

The light grew stronger and stronger, fighting and blending with the beast’s silver light, and soon enveloped the beast’s body in an overwhelming brilliance.

The arrogant look on the specter’s face became distorted with horror and unease, and he croaked and yelped in protest.

*“No! Stop it! Kill me! I don’t want to be your servant! Kill me right n—... Help.”*

“Death would only be a relief for you now. You must not be arrogant. Your life alone could never make up for the many lives you have taken. You must atone for your sins by living, continuing to live, and doing an endless stream of good deeds. That is how you will live from now on.”

*“I don’t want to do good...!! I will never repent!”*

The only response to the specter’s painful screams was the howling of a wild dog somewhere in the distance...

# CHAPTER 1

## Proper and Improper Encounters

*Ding-dong...*

The somewhat off-key ringing of a bell echoed through a classroom.

“Oh, it’s time to go. Okay, see you next time. Should you have any questions, send me an e-mail by the end of the week.”

The lecturer concluded his talk and hurried to leave without saying good-bye.

The classroom was half-full, and the students packed their bags and noisily left their seats.

Masamichi Adachi was one of them. He finally finished copying down everything the teacher had written on the whiteboard in his loose-leaf notebook, looked around the now-empty classroom, and sighed.

*Everyone writes so fast. I’m the last one left again.*

Two months had passed since he failed to get into college.

May had arrived for the rest of the world. The Japanese Golden Week holidays had come and gone, and it was the time of year when everyone began feeling somewhat dreary.

Masamichi sat in a well-known college prep school near the train station closest to where he lived.

He had been placed in the standard college class after entering the school in the spring and taking a placement test.

It wasn’t as if he was aiming for a top university, so it was the appropriate level for Masamichi. Besides, they even offered special classes for students who had failed their college entrance exams and were trying a second or third time. It was a blessing for him since he’d started studying here after receiving a



second rejection from the college he wanted to enter.

Students met with their teachers monthly to discuss course changes and review their learning goals. The spacious study room had numerous reference books and problem sets, so the support was plentiful.

“Okay, then—I’m off. Oh!”

He had let go of the pen he was putting away in his pen case; it went flying, and he caught it just in the nick of time.

“Phew, that was close. I’m not used to this just yet.”

This time, he put his pen in his case, tucked it into his shoulder bag, and stared intently at his right hand.

No one would take him seriously if he said the fingers on his hand had been shaped a bit differently two months ago.

That wasn’t all. He doubted anyone would believe the various things that had happened to him during these two months. They’d think he was having a mental breakdown after two failed attempts at passing college entrance exams.

So Masamichi never confided in anyone about his recent experiences.

Not that he had anyone to confide in.

No matter where he was, no one paid attention to him because his shyness and lack of presence made him fade into the background. Masamichi hadn’t had a single close friend since kindergarten.

He usually greeted his prep school classmates, and they would talk a bit about their studies, but the conversation usually ended there.

But Masamichi didn’t feel lonely now.

He had other things to do besides study, and he had a roommate.

*Yeah, a roommate...though he isn’t human.*

Masamichi slung his bag over his shoulder and got to his feet.

He stepped outside and felt the warm sunshine, reminding him it was almost summer. It was three thirty, but wearing a long-sleeved shirt seemed hot.

Several people coming and going in front of the train station wore T-shirts, and Masamichi rolled his sleeves to his elbows and headed home.

On his way, he bought some treats at a traditional Japanese sweets shop where he had become a regular and headed for a quiet old residential area.

The town had a combination of old and new residences, from classic mansions surrounded by magnificent walls to brand-new low-rise condominiums, maintaining a balance between tranquility and liveliness.

Masamichi lived in a two-story house in a corner of town.

It was a small house with a tiled roof—like something frozen in time since the Showa era.

Still, it was clear that it wasn't just someone's home.

A modest bay window flanked the wooden front door, and some item was always on display on an overhanging platform facing the street.

A picture plate with an iris over a bridge pattern had been placed there a week earlier, appealing profoundly to passersby.

A wooden sign hung beside the door, the shop's name—BOUGYODOU—engraved on the surface. Even the cracks in its wooden surface caused by the passing of time looked tasteful.

*It's such a strikingly elegant name, no matter how often I see it, Masamichi thought. The previous store owner named it hoping to "talk with visitors like old friends and forget time passing," right? He must have been a real fan of antiques and loved conversing with people,* Masamichi mulled as he opened the heavy door.

The Nambu iron tongs attached to the top of the door made a clattering sound.

"I'm home," he called as he stepped inside.

The lighting on the ground floor was dim, even during the day. It had a brick floor displaying antiques and old tools.

It's fine to call it a display, but it was really an impressive jumble of all kinds of items—old and new, large and small, from antiques to old tools—that were

piled up almost to the ceiling in a chaotic heap.

It was tough to casually enter the place because you could hardly see what it was like inside. The bizarre and somewhat alarming sight had to be why many people who dared enter immediately turned on their heels and left.

There was an aisle in the center that one person could pass through, but anyone setting foot in there would feel uneasy, wondering if the goods on either side would collapse and fall over.

Even Masamichi, who had gotten used to the place, still felt like Moses parting the Red Sea every time he passed through.

When Masamichi started living there, all the items had been covered in dust. He couldn't handle house dust, so he coughed and sniffled constantly. However, after two months of regular cleaning, he was free of most of his symptoms, fortunately.

*No customers today.*

Calling out to Shino again to announce his return, Masamichi stepped toward the end of the aisle.

The house's first floor was somewhat eccentric—the floor was raised in the back of the store and separated from the earthen floor by an elegant bamboo screen.

Like a boundary between worlds, the screen and the different floors separated the store from the living area.

A person sat in a classic wooden chair working on something at a desk with his back to the entrance.

It was Shino Tatsumi, the man who had saved Masamichi's life and now took care of his prep school tuition, food, clothing, and shelter. But that wasn't all. Shino was Masamichi's *master*.

To be accurate, he wasn't *a person*.

Although he was presently sitting at a desk and only the upper half of his body was visible, there was no doubt that he was a sight to behold. You could see the outline of well-proportioned muscles beneath the simple turtleneck he wore.

And who wouldn't gasp at the sight of his face, downcast because he was focusing on the items atop his desk?

The sharp, sag-free contours; the snow-white skin without a single blemish; the high-bridged nose; the thin, tight lips; the somewhat sarcastically arched eyebrows; and the sharp, bright eyes that reminded Masamichi of a katana.

His chestnut-colored hair framed his well-defined face with a gentle wave, making him look even more like a statue.

He was the epitome of beauty. Even his fingers were shapely, like a professional hand model's.

He looked to be in his late twenties or early thirties, but the air about him was mature and composed.

For the third time, Masamichi called out that he was home and stood across from Shino's desk.

All the goods around him had blocked Masamichi's view, but he moved in front of Shino and saw he had a large catalog open.

The store was always dark at dusk because of the heaps of items everywhere, yet Shino didn't have his desk lamp turned on.

He ignored Masamichi's repeated greeting. He didn't even raise a brow when Masamichi stood directly in front of him.

Not that Masamichi cared.

*It can't be helped*, he thought. *Specters don't have a habit of greeting people.*

Contemplating that, he pushed the discomfort and slight feeling of loneliness to the back of his mind.

Shino was a specter—more than a thousand years old.

According to his story, he was a fearless apparition that attacked and ate people during the Heian period from 794 to 1185.

Tokifuyu Tatsumi, the spiritual medium who strategically captured him, named him Shino and made him his servant. Masamichi wondered about the techniques Tokifuyu used to strip Shino of his power, create *a vessel*, and lock

Shino's soul inside.

The physical presence that Masamichi now saw in front of him was the *vessel* that Tokifuyu had created more than a thousand years ago. Although Shino had no body temperature, there was nothing unnatural about him other than his unbelievable beauty. He was truly a divine work of art.

Masamichi didn't know the details since Shino had only told him a condensed story of his life, but before Tokifuyu died, the spiritual medium had sealed Shino in a jar and buried it underground.

While slowly weakening and enduring loneliness, Shino had managed to survive over a millennium of confinement, and thanks to the destruction of the jar at a construction site, he was once again free.

Nevertheless, Tokifuyu's *curse* remained alive and well, so Shino was still bound by a rule that he must not attack and eat living humans.

*That rule is what brought Shino and me together.*

As he spoke to him, Masamichi noted the shapely whorl in his hair and his thoughts wandered to Shino taking over the store from the previous owner and his wife—whom he had met by chance—and struggling as a young proprietor, at least in appearance.

"We had a development class for us flunkies at the prep school today. I was having trouble understanding stuff, but it was clear as a bell when the teacher explained it. It's amazing what prep schools can do."

Masamichi hadn't expected a response, but Shino finally looked up from his catalog and stared into his face.

He looked unhappy, but he didn't seem angry. It was his default facial expression.

"It's fine to be impressed, but beware of things that are easy to understand."

"Huh?!"

Ignoring Masamichi's reaction, Shino stood up and walked over to the tatami room in the back. Masamichi followed, climbing the modest staircase beside the desk, careful not to tip over the pack of sweets he had bought.



Behind the curtain was a tea room. The kitchen was on the other side of a low cupboard, and Shino had a room behind it.

Shino sat cross-legged on a thick cushion facing the low table in the tea room.

After living together for two months, Masamichi now understood that this was Shino's way of indicating that he wanted a cup of tea.

"Uh, it's a little late for an afternoon snack, but I bought some delicious-looking sweets at that shop I always go to. I'll make some tea. Will regular green tea be okay?"

Shino responded with a barely audible grumble, and Masamichi smiled.

Shino had a habit of suddenly clamming up when he lost interest. Not only that, he tended to stop answering with words. It had scared Masamichi at first, but he had gotten used to it.

*The way he just snarled means "okay."*

Masamichi filled a heavy iron kettle with water, heated it, pulled out the tea utensils, and carefully transferred the sweets from their cardboard box to small plates so they wouldn't get crushed.

Shino insisted on preparing their meals, so Masamichi only used the kitchen for making tea and washing dishes. Still, he had improved considerably. He had the tea ready in about ten minutes and carried the tray to the tea room.

"Here we are. Which sweet would you like? I bought one made of white bean paste and the other is made of mashed sweet potato with chestnut pieces." Masamichi sat on a cushion facing Shino and placed the two plates on the center of the table. "The chestnut one is called *tsutsuji*—azalea. The pink part on top of the fluffy paste does look like an azalea growing in a hedge. I was impressed by how nicely they made it. The other one is an *otoshibumi*, which the person at the store said was something called a leaf-cutting weevil. It's black bean paste wrapped in a white bean paste dough shaped like a leaf... Well, it looks like a ball, but I guess it represents a rolled leaf."

On top of the soft dough bean cake, Masamichi pointed to a small sphere made of white bean paste.

Shino looked at it and said plainly, "A leaf-cutting weevil is an insect."

"It is?"

Ignoring the surprised expression on Masamichi's face, Shino continued in a tone that said it was common sense.

"A leaf-cutting weevil chooses soft leaves, rolls them in a cylinder, and lays eggs. That *ball* represents an egg it has laid."

"O-oh...an insect egg. Hmm."

"Hence, the term *otoshibumi* is a seasonal term that references early summer when the insect lays eggs. The *otoshibumi*, or *dropped letter*, where the insect gets its name, initially referred to letters people wrote unintended to be seen by others, particularly love letters, that were dropped right next to their cherished so they would pick it up."

Impressed, Masamichi clapped his hands.

"I get it! The leaves the insects roll up look like a letter that people roll up in their hands. I see. Gee, Shino, you know everything."

"You know too little," Shino said in dismay and glanced at the two sweets. "I don't know if the confectioner creates sweets in good taste or you simply made good choices, but neither is bad. Take whichever you prefer."

"Really? Okay, then... I'll take the azalea one over the insect egg," Masamichi said honestly as he took the azalea sweet without hesitation.

Shino had a quick temper, and it irked him when Masamichi said something like "After you, Master," which was so typical of a human.

"You're a strange one," he said. "Insect eggs are delicious. They're the source of life, after all. They may be small, but they give strength to those who eat them," he said matter-of-factly as he pulled the other plate toward him.

*That means he must have eaten insect eggs when he could roam around as a specter. It's times like this that it sinks in that Shino is an apparition.*

Cutting thin slices of the intricately made sweet and bringing them to his mouth, Masamichi glanced at Shino, who grabbed his own with his hand and then chewed it wildly.

Was it because of his beauty that even a rude gesture seemed elegant?

*Come to think of it, he had looked oddly graceful when he gnawed on my right leg, too.*

Masamichi recalled their first encounter, lost his appetite, and put the remainder of his confection back on its plate.

Two months ago, Masamichi was in a hit-and-run accident.

He had been hit hard and his right leg was even torn off. While he lay on the ground waiting for death, Shino had appeared from nowhere, tempted by the scent of blood.

Although Tokifuyu Tatsumi forbade Shino from *attacking and eating a living human*, he wasn't prohibited from eating a leg that just so happened to be detached from a live person's body.

Shino had paid no heed to Masamichi's near-death state as he slurped up the young man's blood, devoured his flesh with great relish, and passionately expressed how much he loved the taste of his blood.

He had then looked at Masamichi with his bloodstained face and gave him an offer: become his servant if he wanted to live.

Masamichi had agreed to be the specter's servant; then everything had gone black. By the time he came to, his battered body had been *mostly* repaired, according to Shino, and he was lying on a bed on the second floor of the shop.

Since then, Masamichi had acted as Shino's servant, though he was allowed to continue studying for his college entrance exam while performing small tasks for his master.

"Oh yeah," Masamichi said when something occurred to him. "You just told me to beware of things that are easy to understand. What do you mean? Isn't it great for things to be easy to understand?"

Shino finished eating his bean cake, swallowed the rest of his hot tea without blowing on it to cool it down, and answered.

"Fool. To explain something to another in an easy-to-understand way, it is essential to pick what you say from information you've gathered. To speak

plainly, we need to edit that information and simplify our words.”

Half consciously, Masamichi sat upright again.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m sure that’s true. Still, I’m grateful that you’re a professional who can pick and choose the information I need.”

Shino sighed. “You are a gullible simpleton if ever I saw one. The selection of information always reflects a person’s principles. It is highly possible that the truth, which should be necessary, will be cut out as they select what to convey as a result. Likewise, the listener’s path to understanding the truth may be distorted.”

“Oh! Is that what happens?!”

“What else could happen? Something easy to understand could simply be a way to deceive you. Always check books you can trust and confirm to support your understanding—that is what Tokifuyu always said. I think these are words you need to hear,” Shino said, his face contorted in disapproval.

He always made a face like that when he mentioned his late master. Yet Masamichi had also noticed early on that Shino’s voice was filled with nostalgia and warmth when he shared his memories, though he was probably unaware of it.

*Of course, he’d hate his master if the man locked him in a jar for a thousand years. However, I have a feeling he still holds some affection for Tokifuyu.*

That was what Masamichi thought. But he knew Shino would reprimand him if he said it. Wisely, he kept his mouth shut and nodded.

“I insisted that I wasn’t interested in reading, but Tokifuyu took advantage of his superior position and taught me how to read and write. It was a nuisance then, but it is useful now, though I feel no gratitude toward him.”

Shino concluded his speech with an annoyed look and a frown on his face, then noticed Masamichi’s half-eaten sweet.

“Aren’t you going to eat that?”

“I kind of feel full after hearing your story.”

“Then I’ll eat it.”

Shino popped the sweet into his mouth before finishing what he was saying, and it disappeared.

A smile returned to Masamichi's face as he watched the beautiful contours of his master's face move as he munched on the confections.

"Oh yeah, the shopkeeper gave me something extra, saying it was to thank me for being a loyal patron. Egg crackers. They look really good. I'll put them in the big tin we use for sweets to accompany our tea, so help yourself. I'll go and make more tea."

Shino didn't say he didn't want it, so Masamichi picked up the teapot and got to his feet.

That was when the Nambu iron tongs rang through the store, announcing the arrival of a customer. Simultaneously, he heard a woman's high-pitched voice.

"My, it's dark in here!"

"Hello. Welcome!"

Masamichi quickly called out since Shino wasn't moving an inch. He made his way through the curtain and jumped onto the earthen floor. Without bothering to go to the stairs and put his shoes on, he ran in his socks to the light switch and brightened the shop.

Not that it was enough to illuminate the whole store since it was only a single old incandescent lightbulb. Still, it was better than nothing.

"Hi. Sorry, I was in the back..." Masamichi started to say, his voice trailing off as he stood stunned to see a teenage girl wearing a blazer uniform—probably a high school student.

Her checkered, pleated skirt looked like it had been hemmed shorter and only reached mid-thigh, revealing her slender, bare legs.

The girl's lustrous, straight hair shone, even in the dim light, and came down below her shoulders in curled ends. She must have given her hair a lot of attention.

She didn't appear to be wearing makeup, but her brows were shaped neatly and her plump lips were a healthy-looking coral, probably because of tinted lip



balm.

Though she seemed intimidated by the unexpected interior, she looked around the store curiously. Then she looked at Masamichi suspiciously.

“...Um, this place...”

“Y-yes?”

Masamichi had received many complaints about how he handled customers at the pub where he worked, and during high school, he could barely meet a girl’s eyes. He had no idea how to interact with girls, so he just stood there awkwardly.

Perhaps the girl had resigned herself to the fact that she had already come inside. She walked down the aisle, approaching Masamichi.

“You guys sell old stuff here, right? That’s what I thought when I saw the plates in your showcase and noticed the old-fashioned name of the place.”

She appeared to have decided that Masamichi was her age and spoke casually.

Masamichi was aware of his childlike face and used to this sort of thing. Not offended, he answered, still nervous and his back ramrod straight.

“Y-yes, that’s right! We deal in various antiques, old tools like you see here... lots of different items.”

Masamichi spoke to the girl respectfully, like she was his senior.

“Yeah, you have a serious collection here,” she said, looking at the piles of goods taller than she was and asking Masamichi, “Do you have *yukata*? Worst-case scenario, an old kimono will do. I’ll remake it to look like a yukata.”

“A...yukata? As in a Japanese summer kimono?”

“Yeah. My teacher told us in health and grooming class that even good kimonos are cheap if you buy them secondhand. I want to get a boyfriend and go on a date to see the August fireworks this summer. So I figured I’d start looking for a nice yukata.”

“Before you find a guy?”

“Got something against that?”

She stared at Masamichi, and he quickly shook his head and put up both hands, his movements awkward like a windup doll.

“N-no, not at all!”

“I checked the thrift store in front of the train station, but they had bad taste. I thought a store like this that sells old things would sell more traditional yukata and kimonos.”

“I see,” Masamichi responded, his gaze wandering around uncomfortably.

He was getting used to dealing with this girl but couldn’t recall seeing anything in the way of kimonos among the vast array of items in the store.

*I did see some hand-knit sweaters, but they were rarities. I have a feeling Shino doesn’t stock up on clothes very much.*

“Hey, do you have kimonos? Like...silk Meisen, I think it’s called? I want one with a cool pattern and a psychedelic color scheme. Or a relaxed yukata.”

*Is she extreme or not?! But anyway, I don’t think we have either here.*

As Masamichi wondered how to respond, a brusque voice came from behind the curtain.

“We have no such items.”

It was Shino.

“What?! I’ve come all the way here, and you act like... Whoa.”

The girl was angry with Shino’s attitude but squealed in surprise, her protest forgotten when he emerged, lifting the bamboo curtain like it took an enormous effort.

*Well, of course she’d react that way. Even I can’t take my eyes off him, and I’m a guy.*

Masamichi agreed, so he just looked at the girl, who seemed starstruck.

“Oh my god, what a hunk. What’s a guy like him doing in a place like this?”

The girl complimented Shino’s looks and stared at him from head to toe with

disbelief. Perhaps the kimono she'd been looking for had slipped from her mind.

*Yeah, I know the feeling.*

Interrupting Masamichi's silent agreement, Shino put a hand on the younger man's shoulders and stood facing the girl.

"We do not have kimonos at the moment. Even if we did, we wouldn't sell it unless it was a good match."

"A good match? What the hell are you talking about?"

The girl continued staring at Shino's face as she complained about the stinging words that belied his beautiful appearance.

Paying no heed to the admiring look in her eyes, Shino pointed to the door.

"We do not have what you want. Go home."

"Whoa. I can't believe this. You're so beautiful yet so rude."

Despite grumbling complaints, she must have realized that it was futile to try to argue with Shino and turned on her heel with a pout.

Her silky hair swayed, giving her a fresh look that was different from Shino's perfection. Masamichi was admiring her youthful beauty when she suddenly stopped midway down the aisle.

She picked up something with her slender fingers from a towering wall of items, dangled it in front of her face for a moment, and then turned back to Shino and Masamichi.

"Hey, what's this?"

Masamichi blinked a few times when he saw what swayed back and forth, hanging from her fingers.

It appeared to be a decorative cell phone strap. A pinkie-sized sculpture of a cat playing with a ball was on the end of the washed-out braided strings. It was a cream color, very simple but cute.

"Did we have that here?"

"Yeah. It was hanging from that weird thing over there."

The girl pointed to a large dark wood carving on a cloth sack, which Shino had just added to his collection the other day.

Ignoring Masamichi's look of surprise, Shino said, still looking grumpy, "It's a *netsuke*."

The girl and I chimed in unison, ""Netsuke?""

"You mean you don't know what a netsuke is?"

"...Excuse me for my ignorance," Masamichi said, shrugging his shoulders and hanging his head, looking sheepish as Shino had been pointing out his lack of knowledge since earlier in the tea room.

"A netsuke is a small ornament. During the Edo period, they were used as clasps for keeping samurai pillboxes, cigarettes, or purses from falling to the ground when they hung them from their belt."

"Oh! Like a paper clip?"

The girl was fashionable and immediately understood what Shino explained. Shino looked at her, a little surprised, and nodded.

"That's right. But they became more decorative than useful after people started dressing in Western-style clothes. Today, they are very popular among collectors. They were probably made as works of art during the Showa era. That one seems to have been mixed in with items I accepted from an inn that closed down."

"Hmm...so is it okay to use any way we want? Can I attach it to my purse or my cell phone?"

"Yes, you can use it any way you like. Yes...I can sell it to you if that's the case. It's a good match for you."

"Huh? That's the second time you've said something about being a good match. What do you mean?"

She was being blunt, but Shino didn't look offended for some reason. He seemed strangely amused.

*The girl and that netsuke must be a perfect match, and Shino's probably happy to have found a good owner for the item.*

Masamichi felt his heart start to warm. Still, he quickly spoke up, concerned that the girl might not understand the nuance of what Shino said if he kept going with his serious commentary.

“It’s a lucky item,” Masamichi told the girl as he tried to explain in simple terms. “You know, like good luck charms they sell at shrines. It might protect you or bring you good luck if you wear it...” Masamichi became painfully aware of what Shino meant when he told him to be careful about simple explanations.

*He’s right. I’m trying not to say the netsuke is an artifact spirit.*

When Shino selected items for his inventory, he never paid attention to their economic value as works of art.

The only thing the goods in the store had in common was that they were artifact spirits.

That was a term that Masamichi learned after coming to this place. Goods that humans had loved for many years eventually had a soul and became a type of spirit, which is what artifact spirits were.

They would start hating humans if thrown away or left abandoned after their owner died. Shino welcomed such artifact spirits to his shop to prevent that from happening and served as a middleman to find their new owners.

Masamichi couldn’t be far off the mark since Shino considered whether artifact spirits would go well with customers before selling them, saying they *bring good luck*. But Masamichi’s voice trailed off as he began to feel guilty, sensing that he was deceiving the girl.

She alternated between looking at the netsuke and at Shino’s face, her eyes wide with hope.

“A lucky item, huh?! Maybe I’ll get a boyfriend if I have this!”

“I don’t know about that. But if you take good care of it and always keep it on your person, it will surely bring you luck—in whatever form.”

“Seriously?! Will I get good grades on my tests? Stuff like that?”

“If I had to say yes or no, it could very well be a yes.”

“Yeah!”

Completely forgetting her kimono hunt, the girl hung on to the netsuke and raised a fist in jubilation. But she soon looked concerned and asked Shino, “How much is this? Is it super expensive? I thought it might be cheap because it looks like it’s made of plastic.”

Shino frowned.

“It is not plastic. This is ivory, a material that is hard to find today.”

“Ivory? Elephant tusks? Damn.”

“Don’t worry—it was legal when that was made,” Shino said squarely, taking her “damn” at face value. Masamichi smiled and asked Shino on the girl’s behalf, “Isn’t ivory pretty expensive?”

“Really? More than I can afford?”

As Masamichi and the girl asked him questions at once, Shino shook his head in annoyance and asked, “How much money do you have on you?”

“Huh? I guess around three thousand yen if I count all my change and stuff.”

“Then that’s fine.”

“What? You’re taking all my money?”

“If that’s the extent of your determination, then I’m not selling it. Go home.”

“You keep telling me to go home,” the girl complained, lecturing him. “You shouldn’t do that.” But she probably couldn’t give up the cute netsuke, because after hesitating, she told Masamichi to put out the palm of his hand and placed exactly three thousand yen in bills and coins on it.

Prompted by a glance from Shino, Masamichi carefully checked the amount and nodded with a smile.

“Okay, that’s exactly three thousand yen!”

Shino nodded in satisfaction.

“The netsuke is now yours. Look up ivory and learn how to maintain it. The item will continue to bring you luck if you wear it and take good care of it. But mistreat it once, and the opposite is sure to happen. Don’t ever forget that.”

The girl listened to Shino with a solemn expression, thought for a moment,

then pulled a small key out of her pocket and carefully attached the netsuke to it.

“This is the key to my school locker. This way, I’ll have the netsuke with me every day of the week and on the weekends since I have club practice on Saturdays and Sundays. Okay?”

“Fine.”

“Good! I promise I’ll take good care of it! Thanks!”

“Yes.”

“‘Yes’? Is that all you can manage? Don’t you guys ever thank customers for their purchase here?”

“Oh, that’s my job! Thank you so much for your purchase!”

“...Why do you guys split roles like that? Why don’t you both thank me?”

Masamichi bowed his head to express his appreciation, and Shino remained standing on the spot, looking arrogant. The girl looked back and forth between the two men, then left the store with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Thank you! Come back again soon!”

Just as he had when he worked at a pub, Masamichi stepped outside and saw her off before returning inside.

“I was surprised when that girl came in, but I think she’ll be a good master to that netsuke. She struck me as a conscientious girl,” Masamichi said with a smile, and Shino agreed.

“I suppose so. More than anything, that netsuke liked her. That’s why it moved to a spot where she would find it.”

“Yeah? Then it was a genuinely good encounter. Maybe she’ll get a boyfriend like she wants.”

“I don’t care. Just make me another cup of tea.”

“Oh yeah, right. Sorry. Coming right up.”

Masamichi hurried to return to the tatami-mat room.

Shino started following suit when he suddenly stopped and turned around, then spoke softly to the piles of goods.

“Let that netsuke be an example to you all. Seize the opportunity when a potential master comes here, and you can reduce my workload.”

Whether in consent or dissatisfaction, the items in the store began clattering and rattling at once.

Shino laughed, turned his back on *them*, and ordered Masamichi through the bamboo curtain, “Make it *Kyo-bancha*.”



About a month later—

Something strange had been occurring at Shino’s Bougyoudou.

There was a dramatic increase in junior and senior high school students—which was not the store’s typical clientele.

It appeared that the girl who had purchased the netsuke got a boyfriend only three days after visiting the store.

She probably told her friends where she obtained the mysterious lucky item. But peculiar stories like that tend to spread quickly. Girls from neighboring schools, and sometimes also male students, began visiting Bougyoudou after classes, seeking their supposed lucky item for romantic fulfillment.

Worried that Shino might lose his temper with them, Masamichi gave up his self-studying after prep school and rushed home, but Shino seemed to be in a good mood—that is, in his own way.

He must have been happy that the artifact spirits, bored in this place, were finding new owners and leaving.

Masamichi congratulated them while Shino said curtly, “It’s only business,” but the boiling point for his anger was higher than usual.

Other than bluntly shooing away a few rude students who were unlikely to take good care of things, Shino recommended small items at reasonable prices, and many customers left with smiles on their faces.



Shino continued receiving requests to pick up old items and would go out and bring back various selections. Because of that, the piles of artifact spirits showed no signs of decreasing.

Masamichi was careful not to ruffle Shino's or the artifact spirits' feathers and diligently cleaned the store every day.

One rainy June evening—

*Clatter!*

The familiar sound of the iron tongs reminded Masamichi that it was time to close shop...though all he had to do was lock the door. But as he thought about it, he realized what the sound meant, and he ran out of the tea room and into the sales area.

Shino was in his room behind the tatami-mat tea room, repairing damaged items. Masamichi figured he would soon need to fetch the man, but the first order of business was to greet the customer.

"Hello! Welcome!"

"Hello," the woman said back in a playful tone. She was tall and looked to be around thirty.

She had a friendly face, short hair that suited her with a style that suggested she was an active type, and was dressed in a pantsuit that looked easy to move around in. Her hair and clothes were soaking wet, so she probably didn't have an umbrella.

"Oh! Uh, please wait a second. I'll get you a towel."

"That would be great. Thank you."

The woman gave Masamichi a genuine smile, and he ran through the tatami-mat room and upstairs, then returned from the bathroom with a fresh towel.

"Here, use this. Are you okay? It's raining pretty hard, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh. I had an umbrella, but the wind blew it onto the ground, and the ribs broke. Those umbrellas they sell at convenience stores are weak."

"Oh, right."

The woman chatted animatedly as she wiped herself dry with the towel and began folding it.

“I’ll take this home and wash it before I bring it back.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Masamichi said and took the towel from her.

She looked disappointed and asked, “Are you sure?” then rummaged around in her large tote bag before pulling out a business card case.

She extracted a card, suddenly becoming polite, and offered it to Masamichi with both hands.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, um, thank you... You’re a reporter?”

The business card said her name was Yumiko Matsuoka and that she was an investigative reporter. Flipping it over, Masamichi saw that it had her contact info as well.

“That’s right. Are you the handsome shopkeeper people are talking about? Hmm, I don’t know. I guess you could say you’re borderline handsome, but you’re more the cute type.”

“Huh? What?!”

Taken aback, Masamichi responded, his voice cracking. No one had ever said he was cute.

The woman...Matsuoka...stared at Masamichi with wide eyes. She wore light makeup but had a firm coat of mascara on her lashes. The many freckles under her eyes added to her natural charm.

“You’re cute but low-key—very low-key. Your store is amazing, and people are sure to talk about it, but with a mild-mannered owner like you? It isn’t all that appealing.”

That wasn’t very nice to hear from someone he was meeting for the first time.

Even Masamichi was a little offended and retorted, “Uh, excuse me, but what does an investigative reporter like you want in here? Are you looking for something?”

A good thing about Masamichi was that he was always polite, even when angry. But on this occasion, it gave Matsuoka an opening to take advantage of him.

“I’m here to do a story on your store. What else?”

“A s-story?”

Matsuoka nodded and looked up at the piles of items towering around her, looking amused.

“Yep. This antique shop is popular among local high school students. I heard you sell items that work fantastically for improving their love life. It’s becoming a hit on social networks, so I rushed over, hoping to do a report on your place before it becomes mainstream. Don’t tell me other reporters have already been here?”

Confused, Masamichi shook his head.

“No, ma’am. The media has never been here...uh, probably not.”

“What do you mean, probably not? Do you mean yes or no?!”

“Um, I haven’t had a chance to tell you that I’m not the owner of this place.”

“Huh?”

“I’m just, uh, sort of a clerk.”

Matsuoka put her hands on her hips in exasperation.

“You aren’t? Well, why didn’t you say so? No wonder it wasn’t making sense to me. So there’s someone else, huh? A super good-looking shop owner?”

Indeed, her description wasn’t wrong. Masamichi nodded vaguely with a troubled look on his face.

“Ah, yes.”

“I see! I’m relieved to hear that. You aren’t bad-looking yourself if I look closely, however. I mean it. You’d certainly be popular with some people. Oh, hey, have you ever seen this magazine?”

Matsuoka extracted a thin magazine from her bag and showed it to Masamichi. On the cover were a boy and girl in casual clothes who looked like

typical high school kids striking a pose. Masamichi didn't recognize the title and apologized.

"No. Sorry."

"What? It happens to be a very popular fashion magazine among teenage girls. I do a two-page monthly column called the Latest Trends in Town. I usually do stories on handmade accessories or new clothing brands, but I wanted to do a feature on this store for the upcoming edition! Girls love mysterious things, so your store will be a big hit. Doesn't it sound like a wonderful idea? It's a win-win for both of us."

"Oh, uh..."

"You can't go wrong. We'll shoot a photo of the superhot owner and the store's incredible messiness, and I also wanted you to help me find something to boost my love life. With an introduction and those photos, it will surely be a super-appealing article. And I'll also take a shot of you and the shop owner. How does that sound?"

"Um, I don't think that will be possible."

"Why not? Hey, let me meet the handsome shopkeeper. Isn't he here today? When will he be in? Do I need to make an appointment? I'll come back if that's the case, but I'd appreciate it if you could schedule it for as soon as possible."

She fired off one question after another, and Masamichi couldn't help but feel flustered.

That was when the moment he'd been waiting for occurred. He heard Shino's voice echoing behind him.

"I'm not interested in media coverage."

Shino appeared, his voice laced with anger.

"H-he's...our owner!"

Rather than waiting for Shino to grab his shoulder, Masamichi hid behind his boss's back like a frightened puppy.

"Whoa! This is one hell of a super-handsome owner. Can I take a photo of you?"

Matsuoka wasn't the least bit offended. Rather, she exclaimed with delight when she saw Shino's good looks. But Shino stared her down with a stern expression that Masamichi had never seen before.

"No. Leave now if you are not a customer."

"Geez. I knew hunks were tough to approach. You heard me explaining to this low-key cutie, didn't you? I know my voice carries. We don't have the same impact as TV, but many high school students today read magazines. We have an online edition besides print, and it's popular with kids who read it on their smartphones. I'm sure the number of customers will double and then triple. Please think about it."

"Absolutely not."

Shino's voice was bone-chillingly cold and his gaze was piercing, so much so that Masamichi trembled. But Matsuoka wasn't the least bit concerned.

She spoke innocently and genuinely, but perhaps that was just an act to get her foot in the door. She may have been through plenty of ordeals as an investigative reporter.

"Okay, I can tell you're in a bad mood today. Of course, you wouldn't like it if someone barged in on you without an appointment. I'm sorry. I apologize for that. I just wanted to drop by and meet you today, but the amazing setup here got me so excited I got carried away."

Matsuoka bowed in apology, but it was clear that she wasn't truly sorry.

Deep wrinkles appeared between Shino's eyebrows, and he looked increasingly annoyed.

"I do not intend to listen to any more of your nonsense. Leave immediately, or I will throw you out," he said as he pointed to the store exit, but Matsuoka was stubborn.

"Don't say that. I'll make an appointment for next time, and I was hoping you could talk to me then. When are you free? When would be a good time to come and see you? Whether it's a weekday or the weekend, between the morning and the morning after that, it doesn't matter. I'll match your schedule. So if you would please see me as soon as—"

“Get out!”

Even the patience of a saint has limits. So do Shino’s “get outs.”

Matsuoka must have sensed from the anger emanating from Shino’s entire body that he would forcibly remove her from the store this time. She shook her head unhappily and raised her hands, like an American actor in some movie saying, “Aw, shucks.”

“Oh, silly me. I was so excited. I guess we got off on the wrong foot. Okay, I understand. I’ll regroup and come back another time when you’ve calmed down. Well, then—I’m leaving before you kick me out. Oh, wait! How interesting.”

Matsuoka had turned to leave before Shino could shout at her again when she noticed courtesy umbrellas for customers in the umbrella stand by the door.

She pulled one out before Shino could stop her and chirped, “It’s still pouring outside, so I’m going to borrow an umbrella. Next time, I’ll return it in addition to interviewing you. Okay, then, ta-ta!”

“Hey!”

Matsuoka disappeared as nimbly as an umbrella on the wind while Shino shouted at her with a vicious look that said he was about to lose it.

Masamichi closed the door and locked it. “Wow...she was something else, huh?”

Shino was still fuming, a fierce expression on his face.

“What a rude woman. Scatter salt around the place and cleanse it of her toxic presence.”

Shino stomped away and disappeared into the back room.

Masamichi felt sorry for him as he ceremoniously sprinkled salt in front of the store as instructed, imagining that Shino wouldn’t be able to return to his work right away judging by the mood he was in.

“Oh, boy. I suddenly feel exhausted.”

He stumbled back to the desk where the old-fashioned cash register was set up. He hesitated to go to Shino's room to see how he was doing, knowing how angry the specter had been.

"He might be too upset to start thinking about dinner. Maybe I should go out and buy something," he muttered weakly. He had decided to just return to his room for the time being when he noticed that Matsuoka had left her fashion magazine on top of the desk.

"Oh. Did she forget...? No, probably not. She left it on purpose."

Masamichi picked it up and flipped through the pages. The spread with a sticky note in the latter half of the magazine was a column called the Latest Trends in Town, which she had written.

"Oh. A story on Taiwanese sweets. Mmm, they look delicious, and they're pretty inexpensive. So she writes about things that teenage girls can afford to snack on after school."

Intrigued, Masamichi began reading the article.

But he was startled and almost dropped the magazine when he heard Shino call for him through the sliding paper door.

He loudly responded, "Yes?!"

"Bring me a glass of cold water!" was Shino's order.

*Oh...maybe he wants water so he can calm down.*

Essentially, Shino was surprisingly simple, which made him endearing. But this was not the time to relax because Masamichi would surely be caught in the cross fire.

"Right now!"

Masamichi shouted a response again, waited for a few seconds, and went up the stairs, taking the magazine with him and deciding to hide it under his cushion for the time being.

Shino would definitely tell him to throw it out immediately if he told him about it or if Shino found it.

*All I want to do is read it. I'll read it; then I'll throw it away.*

He made an excuse to himself to assuage his guilt, then took the largest glass in the cupboard and began filling it with ice...



## CHAPTER 2

### Sounds Rising to Heaven

After eleven o'clock that night—

“Phew, I’ve finally managed to get that done!”

After reviewing his prep school work, Masamichi stretched out in his room.

Since he was first brought to Bougyoudou, Masamichi has been sleeping in the room on the second floor of the house.

The previous owners, Yoriko and Daizo, had used it as a bedroom, and Shino had offered it to Masamichi as his private quarters.

The couple had been great benefactors to Shino.

He seemed to have had a love-hate relationship with his late master, Tokifuyu.

On the other hand, Yoriko and Daizo hadn’t known about Shino’s true identity. All they did was treat Shino like their son and give him work and a place to live, so Shino seemed to have a soft spot for them.

He shared memories of the couple with Masamichi in his usual matter-of-fact tone, objectively stating facts. Still, his stories had a definite sense of warmth and familiarity.

At least Masamichi thought so.

*If it were me, I’d probably want to leave the room as it is, with the presence of the people I love preserved.*

Masamichi looked at his writing desk and let out a small sigh.

It was a desk that Shino had arranged, saying, “*You need a desk if you are going to study.*” Made at a furniture factory in Kobe decades earlier, it was an elegant desk that some called a writing bureau in the European way.

According to Shino, the term initially referred to furniture used for storage, while the large front part could be lowered for writing.

It had several solid drawers that could be used for storing various daily items, and Masamichi used the front as a desk when he wanted to study. It was convenient in a room that wasn't very large.

The color of the wood had faded over time, which suited the old house well.

*But we had to remove Yoriko's dressing table so the desk would fit.*

Tracing a small scratch on a corner of the top panel—a remnant of the previous owner—with his fingertip, Masamichi thought about the dressing table that was no longer there.

The wooden dressing table had as much character as the desk. It had been decorated with beautiful floral carvings here and there. Masamichi didn't know what type of flowers they were, but he could at least identify the lilies. It had been a beautiful, classic dressing table.

Many cosmetic items Masamichi assumed had belonged to Yoriko had been in the drawers, and although he had never met the woman, he felt a sting of pain when he saw the partially used containers.

Masamichi had been away at prep school when Shino removed the dressing table from the room and disposed of it.

"It isn't as if Yoriko's spirit dwells in the dressing table," Shino said. "And it isn't old enough to be an artifact spirit. Furthermore, I never saw her putting on makeup, so it is unimportant to me." As an outsider, Masamichi had no choice but to acquiesce.

Masamichi had nothing to do with the dressing table, so what Shino said about *"unused furniture being pathetic"* was plausible.

*Shino said he sold it to a furniture dealer he trusted. I'm sure they'll fix it up nicely so it can have a new owner, which is better for the dressing table. But...*

Masamichi still felt a prickly sensation in his chest that wouldn't disappear.

The first time he'd awakened in the room, all the furnishings had been covered with dust.

Of course, being a specter, Shino didn't care about dust. Even so, the tea room downstairs had been clean to a certain degree, which meant he had intentionally left this room on the second floor untouched.

Suppose Masamichi were to ask him why. Shino would probably say blithely that he wasn't interested in cleaning rooms he doesn't use. Masamichi could easily imagine that.

But there was another possibility he couldn't stop thinking about. Maybe Shino had left the room untouched because he wanted it to remain as it was when its deceased residents had been there.

*I'd probably want to leave the place the way it was. That way, I could feel the person's presence whenever I entered that space. What if Shino left this room untouched, feeling that way, but had no choice but to change things because I came along...?*

Masamichi thought he was probably thinking too much, but those feelings stopped him from buying new furniture or gadgets.

*Shino would probably say it's ridiculous if I mentioned it to him, but I have a feeling that deep down, he wants to leave this room the way it was when Daizo and Yoriko were here. I've never met them, but I can get a sense of what they were like from the stories Shino tells me, and I can feel their presence through the things left in this room.*

Masamichi was putting his reference books and writing utensils in his desk drawer, thinking about things like that, when he heard an unfamiliar sound.

"Huh?"

He stood up and listened carefully.

"That's...music, isn't it?"

Because of the strangeness of the tune, he made that a question rather than an observation.

The notes were subtly off-key from the familiar do, re, mi scale, yet they formed a decent melody.

*I don't know this tune, but it's strange...like a halftone has lowered everything.*

*The fluctuations are unique. Oh, wait. Maybe it's—*

A woodwind instrument!

Masamichi's round eyes widened.

It wasn't a recorder or a flute. It was the kind of woodwind instrument that plays in a Seishi Yokomizo film or at a shrine.

And it was coming from downstairs.

"I wonder if Shino is playing it? Or if it is coming from something else?"

Curious, Masamichi left his room and tiptoed downstairs.

The tea room was pitch-black, and there was no sign of Shino. The sound seemed to be coming from Shino's room beyond this one.

Masamichi stood by the wall in the dark tea room and listened intently.

The music wasn't continuous. It would stop abruptly and go off-key now and then.

*If Shino isn't watching a video, could he be the one playing that instrument...?*

As he stood there for a while, Masamichi's eyes were adjusting to the darkness, probably helped by the faint light from the streetlight outside entering through the small window in the kitchen.

It would allow him to move forward without tripping on the low table or the cushions around it.

*I just want to get a little closer and listen to the music.*

He was holding his breath and carefully approaching Shino's room one step at a time when a voice coming from behind the sliding door startled him.

"Hey. What are you doing?"

"Eep!"

Startled, Masamichi yelped and fell on his butt on the tatami mat.

"Oww..."

*Oh, I forgot. Shino has fantastic hearing because he's a specter! It didn't mean anything for me to sneak.*

The woodwind instrument's sound had stopped completely, and Masamichi heard a sarcastic voice behind the closed sliding door.

"Come in here if you want something."

"Um, it isn't as if I want something... I mean, yes, sir!"

Masamichi rubbed his sore buttocks over his sweatpants as he stood and opened the sliding door to Shino's room.

"Excuse me. I'll make this a brief visit."

The room was the same six-tatami-mat size as Masamichi's room, but the tatami was new and bluish.

Compared to his room, this one appeared more spacious, with a writing desk, cushion, and bookshelf beside Shino's mattress.

*Oh, he already has his mattress laid out. I wonder if he was going to bed...*

"Whoa!"

Masamichi looked around in search of Shino and yelped in surprise.

The sliding door to the closet was open about a third of the way, and he saw something—Shino's almond eyes—gleaming inside.

"Quiet. Don't make a fuss."

"B-but! What are you doing in the closet?!"

Masamichi went over to the closet and gently opened the sliding door, finding Shino sitting inside.

He had his knees tucked into his chest, his tall body folded, and he held a dark flute in his right hand.

"Oh, a flute! So you were the one playing after all."

"It is a dragon flute," Shino said in his characteristically curt response as he slowly exited the closet. Holding the flute...er, dragon flute...in his hand, he sat down cross-legged on the cushion by his desk.

Masamichi followed suit and took a seat on the tatami mat across from him.

Shino wore casual loungewear, the same long-sleeved T-shirt and sweatpants

he'd worn at dinner. To Masamichi, the combination of his attire and the ancient-looking flute was striking.

Then the interrogation began.

"How dare you spy on your master."

Masamichi sat up straight and bowed his head.

"I'm sorry! But I wasn't trying to spy on you. I was curious when I heard the sound of a flute and wondered what you were listening to."

"I was playing it," Shino said as succinctly as ever. Then he placed the flute on his thigh and looked down at it. It was about forty centimeters long. The wooden body was wrapped with the black fibers of some plant.

"Is the dragon flute a Japanese musical instrument?"

"It is a flute used in gagaku, ancient court music. It has quite a wide range and is called a dragon flute to reference the cries of a dragon that travels between the heavens and the earth. It has been a while since I last practiced, and I was surprised to learn that even I, a specter, can get rusty," Shino explained and handed the flute to Masamichi.

"Can I touch it?"

"I don't mind."

After hesitating momentarily, Masamichi carefully took the flute with both hands.

It was heavier than he'd expected, particularly the end one blew into.

"Is there a weight on the end where the vent is?"

"Yes, a lead weight. It resonates and increases the volume."

"Oh, I see! And it is made of bamboo, right? What about the wrapping on the outside...?"

"This flute uses rattan. Thinly torn rattan fibers are wrapped around sooty bamboo and hardened with lacquer."

"Huh... It's beautiful. And it looks really cool. Is it old?"

“No.”

Shino shook his head and took the flute back. He held it up in a familiar manner, pressed his lips lightly against the mouth, and made a short sound that sounded to Masamichi like the *re* sound in *do, re, mi*, then lowered it again.

“The previous owner brought it back with other art pieces a while after I moved in. It seemed a person Daizo visited forced him to take things they wanted to get rid of instead of selling him the items he wanted to buy. This dragon flute was one of those unwanted items. Daizo said it would probably sell for around one hundred thousand yen at most.”

Masamichi’s brow furrowed helplessly.

“I have no idea if that’s cheap or expensive.”

“There is no limit to expensive musical instruments. A one hundred thousand-yen dragon flute is enough for daily practice, isn’t it? Not that I know much about it.”

“I guess there are things that even you don’t know much about. Did you buy it from Daizo?”

“No. He just gave it to me, saying he had no plans to sell it, though I didn’t particularly want it...”

“But?”

“I was once forced to listen to a lot of dragon flute music.”

Masamichi prompted Shino to go on, and a frown appeared on the specter’s beautiful face.

Seeing his sullen expression, Masamichi immediately knew what he would say.

“Hey, did your master play it?”

Shino nodded and frowned.

“Tokifuyu Tatsumi was a master of the dragon flute. He must have played it all the time, neglecting his work as a spiritual medium.”

“It’s nice to have a hobby, and I think it’s great that he was so good at it. So he

played it often?”

Masamichi’s eyes sparkled with curiosity about this person he had never met. Still looking uncomfortable, Shino confirmed it.

“He played it whenever he had the time. He would play it saying butterflies were flying about, when the moon was pleasant, when the sweetfish at dinner tasted good...and when he saw a spirit appear.”

“A spirit!”

Masamichi couldn’t help reacting to that.

“Everything else you just mentioned sounds nice and elegant, except for that last one.”

“Taming it,” Shino retorted with a straight face.

“‘T-taming...it’?” Masamichi repeated the words in a whisper.

“The sound of the flute is used to enchant the apparition into submission. In modern parlance, it’s like neutralizing them.”

Masamichi nodded emphatically.

“I think I get it! It’s like restraining a monster with sounds. I saw scenes like that in an anime I watched as a child.”

“...Well, you aren’t far off the mark. For Tokifuyu, the dragon flute was both for his enjoyment and a tool of his trade as a spiritual medium. He always carried his favorite flute with him.”

*I knew it. Shino looks absurdly grumpy when he talks about Tokifuyu, yet he seems nostalgic and a little happy.*

Considering that, Masamichi was caught off guard by Shino’s grumbled words.

“I don’t even want to think about it, but Tokifuyu even used that damned flute when he punished me.

“Pfft!” Masamichi burst out laughing.

“How dare you laugh at your master!”

Masamichi quickly apologized. “Sorry! I really am. But I couldn’t help it. I



mean, look at you now. You're so cool and imposing... Imagining your master punishing you made me crack up."

"Don't imagine it, you idiot."

"I said I'm sorry. But you said he punished you with his flute. Don't tell me he hit you with it?"

Shino looked down at the flute in his hand in annoyance.

"It was the sound. He must have set up some trick when he locked me in this 'vessel' of a human form. My head would ache as if clamped in a vise when he played his flute, and I would end up rolling around on the ground begging for forgiveness. That was a man without blood or tears," Shino said indignantly while Masamichi struggled to push back the laughter rising to the surface again.

Shino glared at him with a sharp glint in his eye.

"Oh, um, I was just thinking about Son Goku—*Dragon Ball*? I wondered if Sanzo Hoshi also punished him like that."

"Don't compare me to some monkey!"

"S-sorry. I don't know what to say. But Tokifuyu must have been amazing, doing something like that with a flute. Did he teach you how to play it?"

Shino didn't immediately respond.

He gently placed the dragon flute on his writing desk, stood up, and suddenly began removing his shirt. His snow-white, well-balanced, muscular torso was immediately exposed.

"Hey...what are you doing?!"

Startled, Masamichi backed away, still sitting, but Shino draped his shirt across one arm and said bluntly, "I'm sorry, but I am not full. I'm irritated by that noisy woman, and dinner hasn't satisfied my hunger. I'm going to bed now. But let me eat you first."

"Oh...Miss Matsuoka."

Masamichi's chest heaved with relief as he grasped the situation.

Shino locked himself in his room, fuming after Yumiko Matsuoka fled when

she didn't get her interview.

He had come out grim-faced a little after six and cooked their dinner as usual.

The main dish was grilled dumplings with lots of edamame and enoki mushrooms. Steamed in a frying pan and served right in it, the dumplings were nice and fluffy with a crispy, aromatic bottom. Delicious.

Sides included Japanese-style coleslaw with shredded cabbage, carrots, and precooked seasoned eggs. Masamichi was very satisfied, but apparently Shino didn't feel the same way.

Shino once said human food was enjoyable but strictly a snack.

For a specter like him, human meat was the ultimate feast.

He had decided to make Masamichi his servant because he so enjoyed the taste of the young man's flesh.

However, it was too painful for Masamichi to have his limbs removed whenever Shino desired, and it was also too much trouble for Shino to repair and restore the young man's body after devouring it.

Thus, when Shino became hungry, he demanded Masamichi's *energy*.

Masamichi understood that as something like aura. Shino could appease his hunger by getting under the covers together and ingesting the *energy* Masamichi released when relaxed.

"I'm going to get ready for bed. Just give me a minute," Masamichi said.

"Hurry up."

"Okay!"

Masamichi quickly got to his feet and ran to his room. This was the only time Shino wouldn't reprimand him for making too much noise when he ran up the narrow stairs.

Masamichi changed into light cotton pajamas, brushed his teeth, and sped back to Shino's room, where the specter had also changed into his nightgown and was already under the covers.

Over the past few months, this had happened more often than he could

count. Masamichi had been nervous just lying next to Shino at first, but he had gotten completely used to it.

Shino was in a better mood when he consumed Masamichi's *energy* and became more talkative, which is the part Masamichi enjoyed most.

"Okay, here I am."

Masamichi may have been small, but two men on one mattress was cramped. Still, it was easier for Shino to *eat up* his *energy* when they huddled together.

Masamichi put his pillow next to Shino's, turned off the light, and crawled under the covers.

Although Shino was already lying there, it was chilly. That was when Masamichi was hit with the fact that Shino had no body temperature, no matter how human he looked.

Only the faint moonlight illuminated the room.

"Huh? You've switched to a summer futon," Masamichi noted. "Didn't you say specters don't feel hot or cold?"

Lying on his back, Shino kept his eyes open and moved the tip of his chin slightly like he was shrugging.

"That is correct. But Yoriko..."

"What about Yoriko?"

"She always nagged about changing clothes and bedding to summer mode in June. I figured it was a rule of this house rather than a human one. So she and her husband may be gone, but I maintain the tradition. I try to adjust what I wear based on the clothes I see people wearing on morning TV shows and the outfits of whoever passes by the store."

"Oh, I see. You're surprisingly careful about things like that, huh?"

"People are tough on those who don't fit in. It's troublesome to make unnecessary waves."

Masamichi had been trying to get comfortable by turning his body toward Shino in the small space and leaning against the specter when he startled and

lifted his head.

“But you’re much stronger than humans! Why should you care if you stand out from the people around you?”

The corners of Shino’s mouth turned down in the darkness.

“I do not fear mere mortals...is what I’d like to say.”

“But you’re scared?”

“Even the frailest creature can be surprisingly powerful in a herd. They must never be underestimated. It’s fine to stand out and resist if needed, but if you learn to live among the herd, you can bob in the big waves, drift slowly, and build your strength in the process...”

“Is that what Tokifuyu said?”

Shino nodded slightly.

“It is easy to resist but hard to fit in. It is easy to show off one’s presence but difficult to kill oneself and be buried in the crowd. Tokifuyu would laugh and ask me which was the sign of a strong man. As the years went by, especially once I began living in this modern world, I have come to understand what he said. So to me, living among others is like training to become stronger.”

“I see...!”

Masamichi gazed at Shino’s well-defined profile with admiration.

“As Matsuoka said, you’re ‘extremely good-looking’ by modern standards... and you *are* supercool. People look twice or thrice at you when we walk around town together. But you sometimes suddenly disappear, and I panic and start looking for you. Is that because—”

“I practice eliminating my presence.”

“You can do that?!”

Shino’s almond eyes opened wide at Masamichi’s astonishment.

“Why are you surprised?”

“Why?”

Seeing the lost look on Masamichi's face, Shino grinned in amusement.

"When I was serving as Tokifuyu's follower during the Heian period, I stood out far more than my master wherever I went and whatever I did, and he would laugh and say I was not suited to be a secret messenger. I couldn't get the hang of it for a long time, even after being freed in this world, but to tell you the truth, I've become much better at it since you moved in."

"What?!"

Masamichi lifted his head from his pillow at the unexpected words. But Shino only turned up a corner of his mouth and looked more and more amused.

"Are you deliberately making your presence disappear? If you are, you are seriously talented."

"I've never done anything like that!"

Despite his usual calm, Masamichi couldn't help getting nervous when Shino said he was making his presence disappear. For the first time since they met, he glared at Shino.

"In the classroom and at work, people have always treated me like I wasn't there. I'm not good at joining conversations with others, and I don't have topics to talk about or the courage to start chatting with people. I've never been good at approaching others."

"Really? You seem friendly with the people who come into the store."

"That's because of my work experience at the pub. The boss always said in our daily meetings to greet people cheerfully, reply cheerfully, and be bright and energetic. I tried my best, but it seemed that even in the restaurant, the air around me...my presence...was gloomy. That's why they fired me."

With a deep sigh of self-loathing, Masamichi rested his head on his pillow like a deflated balloon.

But surprisingly enough, Shino replied, "Humans are fools, after all, for not making the most of that trait of yours."

"Huh? Trait?"

"If you have little presence without being aware of it, you can do things

inconspicuously without others noticing you.”

“Maybe you’re right. But on the other hand, it’s also true that when I want to order or buy something at a store and call out to a clerk, I have difficulty being noticed.”

Shino continued speaking with a straight face without paying the slightest attention to Masamichi’s self-deprecation.

“That is because you aren’t good at outwardly projecting your presence, your will.”

“Ugh!”

Shino had hit a sore spot, and Masamichi was stumped.

“That is something you can improve with practice. It should be much easier than making your presence fade away.”

“It isn’t easy to be assertive. For me, that is. I’m plain, unlike you, Shino, and I’m small and have a soft voice. There’s nothing for me to convey.”

“Fool.”

Remaining lying on his back, Shino looked at Masamichi with a sideways glance and tediously raised a hand. He then flicked his pouting servant between his eyebrows.

“Oww!”

That was all it took for Masamichi to cover his brow and squeal in anguish.

He wasn’t overreacting. He had felt more of a shock than pain, like an electric current gushing from his brow to his brain.

“Shino, you didn’t have to do that. You just gave me an electric shock.”

Shino seemed unfazed by Masamichi’s complaint and told him, “Remember that sensation.”

“Huh?”

Masamichi raised himself on one elbow and tilted his head, his other hand still pressed against his brow.

“That is where you have *a third eye*. You’ve practiced opening it a few times.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Masamichi rubbed his fingertips against his eyebrows.

Shortly after he became his servant, Shino had Masamichi practice *reading* a music box.

Shino had taught him to use his third eye, which was buried under the skin between the eyebrows, rather than his eyes, to see through the vessels to the souls within—the true identity of artifact spirits.

Since then, he practiced repeating that occasionally and could now open his third eye quite smoothly. However, he wasn’t competent in reading an object yet, and he couldn’t close his third eye well and had to have Shino close it.

“Don’t tell me I have to open my third eye when I talk to people, too?”

“I’m not saying you must go that far. But try to be aware that you have an eye to see the essence of things and human nature. It will surely make a difference. Your intentions will shoot out from that third eye and pierce the hearts of others. Like an arrow.”

“...Is that how it works?”

“You dare doubt your master? You are dishonoring me.”

“Sorry! R-right. You’re giving me all this advice, so I’ll do my best.”

“You do that. But be the dopey person that you usually are. It’s safer for weak ones to leave their *energy* hidden. You may not think this, but it’s a considerable talent to fade into the background. You should treasure it.”

“I never expected my master to praise me for that.”

Masamichi put his head back on his pillow and relaxed.

It was the first time that someone had praised him for his reclusiveness and lack of presence, and the fact that Shino, with his massive presence, was the one to do that seemed funny and made him happy.

“The grass is always greener, eh?”

“What?”

“There’s a saying that the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, right? I wondered if it applied to specters, too, and if you envied things you don’t have.”

“I don’t envy you in the slightest. Not by any means.”

“...Right. I felt so happy I got carried away.”

Masamichi apologized and chuckled.

Ever since he could remember, people had told Masamichi that his shy nature was negative and needed to be overcome. He was fully aware of it, but it was an unexpected joy to be told it was something to be treasured.

A soft golden light began emanating from his completely relaxed body.

That was the manifestation of Masamichi’s *energy*.

Shino licked his tongue like a slaving predator.

“You’re that happy that I gave you a small compliment?”

“...Yeah, I am. No one has ever given me compliments.”

Shino stretched out an arm and pulled Masamichi to him.

The first night they slept next to each other, Shino had almost raped Masamichi so he could steal his *energy*. But after Masamichi refused with all his might, there had been no sign that Shino would repeat a barbaric attempt like that.

Masamichi reflexively twitched when Shino came into contact with his body, but the hands holding his waist made no sexual moves. His only objective was to keep Masamichi’s body close to his so he could efficiently take in his chi.

*I’m surprised that specters are gentlemen in that sense. Or maybe it’s just that they’re faithful to their contracts.*

Masamichi let his thoughts wander as he tried to relax.

Shino saved Masamichi’s life on the night they first met. And in return, he demanded that Masamichi be his servant so he could eat him.

Masamichi had no choice but to accept that condition if he wanted to live. But to him, sex should be an act of mutual affection, not a means of *feeding*



someone.

Although reluctant and annoyed, Shino had accepted Masamichi's refusal to have sex with him.

"The human language is full of differences in opinion, making it difficult to create contracts that don't have loopholes."

He occasionally complained, and their huddling together was a typical example of that sort of loophole.

In any event, Masamichi was grateful and relieved that Shino let him get away with snuggling under the covers to give him *energy*.

Their chatting stopped, and the room suddenly went quiet.

It was late at night, traffic outside had virtually ceased, and the only things they could hear were the faint chirps of birds that sang at night, perhaps in a nearby park.

"Does my *energy* taste that good?" Masamichi asked in a whisper, watching in amazement as his *energy* gently illuminated the darkness.

Shino had closed his eyes at some point and said with a sigh, "Yes."

"Better than those dumplings you made tonight that are second to none at any restaurant?"

"It's beyond comparison. Human *energy*...especially yours...is nectar. It permeates every nook and cranny of this temporary vessel that you are."

"That much? I wonder if it's like what honey is to me."

"Perhaps. This fine *energy* reminds me of the taste of your flesh and blood the night I found you. That, too, was..."

"Let's stay away from that topic... Isn't it against your contract with Tokifuyu to rip off my limbs and eat them?"

"That's right. It's infuriating."

Despite the resentment in his tone, Shino must have been in a good mood, thanks to Masamichi's *energy*. His profile was as calm as a statue's.

Figuring it was okay to continue the conversation, Masamichi brought up

what he had asked earlier.

“So did Tokifuyu teach you to play the dragon flute?”

Shino’s brows furrowed slightly, but he replied in the affirmative, his eyes still closed.

“Yes. I swear I didn’t ask him to teach me. He wanted to teach me. When I learned to play it, he said he would *‘play the hichiriki double-reed flute or panpipe-like sho, and we would have fun performing together.’* He was a troublesome man who came up with all kinds of nonsense.”

Shino mocked the way Tokifuyu had said that in his forever calm and gentle way.

Just listening to Shino gave Masamichi the impression that Tokifuyu loved Shino. It was a little funny and a little sad that Shino seemed oblivious to that.

“Then you must have practiced hard with your master teaching you.”

“Me? Practice hard? Never.”

“You didn’t?”

Shino shrugged slightly.

“The dragon flute has a mouth and seven finger holes. It’s quite simple, consisting of holes drilled in bamboo.”

“Yeah, I saw that when you let me hold it. It seems it would be hard to make sounds on that.”

“The way the finger holes are held down can cause the sound to be lost or the tone to change. As you blow into the mouth, the angle and force of your breath will also change. One must differentiate between the harmony created with the lower notes and the high-pitched energetic sounds by how they blow, not with the fingering.”

“It sounds complicated.”

“It *is*. Additionally, I was much more short-tempered and temperamental back then than I am now. However, you probably can’t imagine that from how generous I am,” Shino said as he opened his eyes and stared sideways at

Masamichi.

Unable to tell if he was joking or serious, Masamichi just nodded vaguely.

“Did you sometimes refuse to practice?”

“Not only that, I often broke the flutes that Tokifuyu forced me to play.”

“Whoa. That must have made him mad.”

“He wasn’t angry. I never once saw him look upset.”

Masamichi was surprised.

“Maybe they were cheap flutes for beginners. Is that why he didn’t get mad when you broke them?”

As if tracing a distant memory, Shino turned his gaze to the woven bamboo ceiling and muttered to himself.

“Tokifuyu would pick up the flutes I had broken and try to mend them. He used glue, rice, pine resin...and various other materials, but even after splicing the tubes, he couldn’t get them to sound right again.”

Masamichi frowned.

“That’s sad.”

“Tokifuyu also seemed to think so. His head hung dejectedly when he held a broken flute. I thought that would teach him.”

“That’s terrible!”

“It was a long time ago. Don’t be so quick to blame your master. I told him it was his fault for making a futile attempt to teach a specter to play the flute, and this is what he said quietly...

*“It is true that this flute is far from being a masterpiece. But if repaired and used carefully, it will last for many decades. It will gain character as it’s passed from one person to another and may produce tasteful sounds one day.”*

Shino wasn’t making an exaggerated attempt at sounding like Tokifuyu. He was simply imitating his tone and voice.

Yet Masamichi thought it was the man’s voice he was listening to.

*I never met him, and I've never heard his voice. So why do I feel that way?*

Curious, Masamichi continued to listen to Shino's story in silence.

*"Life dwells in all things. A man, a beast, an insect, a tree, a plant, a specter... and even a utensil can have life. You did not only snap that flute in a moment of frustration. You broke the vessel for a life that may have someday dwelled there. That is a very sinful thing to do, Shino."*

Masamichi closed his eyes and listened. Feeling as if Tokifuyu were whispering in his ear, he slowly opened his eyes.

Shino was still looking up at the ceiling. However, his eyes seemed focused on somewhere far, far away.

"What did you do when he said that?"

"I sulked."

"Pfft! Oh, sorry. But I can imagine it."

"Shut up. He preached to me, I got irritated, and I talked back. So what? I am a demon that tore people apart and ate them until he caught me. What does it matter if I broke some measly flute and ruined a life that might one day have been there? That was what I truly thought."

"...Okay."

"But Tokifuyu said nothing more. He cradled the broken flute in his arms and left. He seemed depressed, which was rare. But the next day, he placed a new flute before me. I broke that, too, and it went on and on. Eventually, I gave up and learned to play it reasonably well, though I wouldn't play an ensemble with him."

"You didn't?"

"No way. I had no interest in pleasing him...but after I became free in this world and Daizo showed me a dragon flute, I was overwhelmed by a strange feeling."

"...What kind of feeling?" Masamichi questioned softly.

Shino thought about it for a few seconds as if searching for an answer and

said quietly, "A sense of nostalgia."

Masamichi's hand clenched the front of his own pajama shirt.

Shino's words seemed to sum up his memories of a period so long ago and with a whirlwind of various emotions so suddenly that it made Masamichi dizzy to think about it.

But Shino continued speaking in a flat, emotionless tone.

"Specters don't have the multitude of emotions that you humans do. We have emotions, but there is no such thing as sorrow. However, when Daizo handed me the flute, I experienced a strange anguish. I could no longer break it."

"Why was that?"

"I don't know."

Answering in a short, curt manner, Shino turned his head and looked straight at Masamichi.

"After coming here and seeing Daizo treat and fix old, seemingly worthless items as if they were treasures...and recognizing that souls reside in those things and become artifact spirits, I realized that Tokifuyu's words weren't lies."

"...Okay. Right. This shop has many artifact spirits waiting for their new masters to appear. Hey, is that memory the reason why you started this business as a go-between for artifact spirits? Like you're atoning for breaking those flutes?"

Masamichi's voice was bubbly; he felt like he'd connected the dots. But Shino responded immediately, flatly.

"Unlike you, I'm not that commendable. Specters do not have a concept of atonement for their sins. That's just selfish talk among humans to nullify their wrongdoings."

"Ngh. Maybe you're right, but..."

"When Tokifuyu died, that was the first time I felt a sense of what he called *life*."

Masamichi gripped his pajamas harder without realizing it.

“You were already sealed in a jar when he died, right?”

“That’s correct. Ever since he captured me and made me his servant, I had thought I would one day defeat him. But I wasn’t able to do that.”

Shino raised a brow by a few millimeters, then lowered his gaze.

“I sent my consciousness out of the jar and watched his corpse. With no family, there was no one to mourn for him, and his remains were abandoned in the field.”

“That’s terrible!”

“It wasn’t unusual back then,” Shino said. “The clever man who tricked me, twisted me with his wiles, always laughed at all the nonsense around him, became a mute wreck with a face like a mask. It was only the loss of one small life, and his remains turned into an empty vessel.”

“A...vessel.”

“Right. I watched that vessel break down from the jar I was in. I watched the crows and wild dogs devour the white skin and red flesh. The gentle face gradually turned reddish black and swollen, and then it melted like sticky mud, and the white skull became exposed...and it finally shattered and returned to the soil. I simply watched. For decades and decades.”

“Shino.”

Masamichi had no idea what to say. All he could manage was Shino’s name. He let go of his pajamas and touched Shino’s cold, broad chest.

“Why are you crying?”

“Huh?”

Masamichi gasped. He blinked at Shino’s question, and tears began streaming down his cheeks.

“Oh. I didn’t realize I was crying. It’s so sad.”

“Sad? What? Who?”

“You are!”

Masamichi couldn't help sounding dismayed, but Shino dismissed the idea.

"I have no feelings of sadness. I told you that before."

"But!"

"All I felt was that life was amazing. When a human is devoid of life, he will become a lump of meat. On the other hand, if a soul resides in a vessel, it becomes an artifact spirit that lives far longer than a human. I...indeed broke flutes that were the vessels for life. Those flutes may have become artifact spirits. I still don't consider it a crime, but I don't want to repeat it. That's all there is to it. There is nothing for you to cry about."

Masamichi silently wiped away his tears without saying yes or no, then leaned closer to Shino—close enough to rest his head on his shoulder.

"...What do you think you're doing?"

"I don't know. But I can't help it—if you don't mind."

"I don't get it," Shino said, somewhat bewildered.

"Hmm?"

"You go ahead and cry when all I did was tell you an old story, and your *energy* has become thicker and sweeter. I have no idea what is going on."

"Now that you mention it...", Masamichi muttered as he pressed his forehead against Shino's firm shoulders.

He could tell that the golden *energy* radiating from his body was stronger than before.

The pale gold sparkling light was now surrounding himself and Shino's body as if it were an insubstantial blanket covering them.

"But it isn't bad, right?"

"No. It isn't bad."

Masamichi knew that when Shino said that, he meant it was considerably good.

"You have me."

Shino furrowed his brow.

“I don’t need to be told. So what?”

Shino’s words were cold, yet his palm, still holding Masamichi’s waist, made a slight movement that confirmed his physical presence.

It was probably an unconscious gesture, and Masamichi smiled.

“Nothing. Sorry...for making you talk so much. Can I just ask you one more thing?”

“...What?”

Masamichi summoned the courage and asked, “Why were you sitting in the closet when I came to your room? I don’t know if this is the time to bring it up, but I was curious.”

Uncharacteristically, Shino was at a loss for words, then he uttered a low groan and mumbled like he didn’t want to answer.

“Yoriko scolded me the first time I played the dragon flute here.”

“Huh?!”

“She rarely got angry, but she was quite serious that time, saying a burglar would come if I played the flute at night.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha. I thought the same thing. My grandmother also said a burglar would come, though my grandfather said it was a snake that would come to our house. Whatever, they told me that flute music at night brings the unwanted.”

Shino frowned in disgust.

“You too? Humans believe in such silly superstitions. I told Yoriko not to worry about it, saying I’d shoo away anything that came. Then she scolded me from a different angle.”

That got Masamichi curious.

“A different angle? What was that?”

“She said that it was a nuisance to the neighbors.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha. Of course.”



“The house may be sandwiched between a parking lot and a storage shed, but the sound of the dragon flute is so loud it could be heard three doors down. She made it very clear that if I had to play it at night, to do it in the closet.”

Masamichi imagined Shino shrinking as he was reprimanded by a small, elderly woman and made a desperate effort to avoid cracking up. Still, he couldn't avoid smiling broadly, and Shino glared at him.

“Hey, don't rejoice. It's an old story about a disgrace that your master experienced.”

“I know, but...to think that all this time, you've been doing as she said, and that's why you were sitting in that closet...”

“Yes?”

Masamichi swallowed the words *It's so cute* that almost came out of his mouth.

He was sure that if he said that, he wouldn't get away with it. Instead, he managed to come up with something else.

“I think you're conscientious.”

“Of course I am. I owe them much for giving me food and shelter. Even after Yoriko and Daizo's deaths, I will not do anything to damage their reputation.”

Masamichi was serious again as he stared at Shino's face at close range and said, “I think that's a great trait. I respect you for it.”

“There's no need for you to say that on every occasion. It's only natural for a servant to respect his master.”

“...Right,” Masamichi answered briefly as he turned away so Shino wouldn't see him smiling.

He thought Tokifuyu must have given Shino excellent training, though it was probably wise not to say that.

Instead, he said, “I'm kind of sleepy.”

“Of course you are. I've taken your *energy*. Relax and get some sleep. I won't eat your body until the day you die.”

“Please don’t. Well, then...good night.”

It figured that Shino wouldn’t say good night back to him. It appeared that neither Tokifuyu, Yoriko, nor Daizo had managed to teach him the human habit of greetings and farewells.

*Still, that stubbornness is typical of Shino,* he thought as he felt Shino’s body warming with Masamichi’s body heat and fell into a peaceful sleep.

## CHAPTER 3

### An Ache in Her Heart

On Monday afternoon the following week, freelance reporter Yumiko Matsuoka returned to Bougyoudou.

“Hi! I’m back.”

She opened the door and entered, announcing her arrival with a bright smile and voice as cheerful as the welcoming Nambu ironware tongs.

She acted confident, as if she had completely forgotten about being kicked out by Shino on her previous visit.

It was early afternoon, and Masamichi had just returned from his prep school classes. Matsuoka startled him, and he started climbing down from the tea room he had just stepped into when Shino, who was at the cashier’s desk wiping silver cutlery he had recently obtained, stopped Masamichi with a sharp voice.

“You don’t need to welcome a woman who isn’t a customer. Don’t do anything you needn’t do.”

“Oh, um, but.”

Reprimanded as he was lifting the bamboo screen separating the tea room from the shop, Masamichi stopped moving, puzzled.

“Oh, my. Don’t tell me you faithfully obey your manager’s every order. How old-fashioned. Oops, that was close. It’s dangerous here. What is this thing sticking out into the aisle? There’s so much stuff everywhere that I can’t make heads or tails of it. It’s like avant-garde art.”

Matsuoka strolled down the aisle, dressed in the same stretchy pantsuit she wore on her last visit. Her movements were lithe, and she didn’t seem in as much *danger* as she said.

“Hey,” Shino said harshly as he sat in his chair. “We don’t need people who only come here to make a commotion. Get out.”

He didn’t raise his voice in the slightest, but there was a sharpness to his tone, like the snap of a whip through the air, so Masamichi froze, still holding up the bamboo partition.

But Matsuoka’s smile didn’t falter, and she didn’t stop moving forward.

Either she lacked the instinct to feel fear, or she’d had much more horrifying experiences. Unable to figure out which it was, Masamichi just watched breathlessly, and she came right up to the desk where Shino sat.

“Are you not intelligent enough to understand a word I say?”

Now convinced the woman wasn’t a customer, Shino didn’t hesitate to be nasty to her from the moment she entered his store.

“H-hey, Shino, wait a sec. That was uncalled for.”

Masamichi finally removed his hand from the bamboo screen. Instead of jumping to the store floor, he walked down the short staircase behind Shino’s desk. Not having the nerve to step in between the two, he stood quietly behind his master.

Ignoring Shino, Masamichi bowed modestly to Matsuoka, who responded with a dazzling wink and friendly smile.

“Hey, shouldn’t you make this aisle in the center more spacious? I’m not all that fat, but I still didn’t have much room.”

Shino glared at Matsuoka, put the cutlery and polishing cloth down on the desk, and folded his arms.

“I do what I want with everything in my store. Anyone who doesn’t meet my store’s standards is no longer a customer.”

“Ugh, what a dictator. It’s too bad it suits a cool guy when he talks that way.”

Speaking teasingly instead of being exasperated, Matsuoka presented Shino with something she had been holding behind her back.

“Ta-daa. I came all the way here to return the umbrella I borrowed the other

day. It wouldn't hurt to be a little nicer to me."

It was an umbrella kept for customers, which she had helped herself to as she left. It was a common plastic umbrella, but she had dried it and rolled it up neatly.

"Oh, you came here just to bring that back? Thank—"

Masamichi reached out a hand to accept the umbrella, but Shino, looking grim, interrupted his words of gratitude.

"You don't have to thank her. I didn't lend her that umbrella; she stole it. Even if it was just one umbrella, it's still theft. You should be grateful that I didn't report you."

"Hmm. So it's another failed attempt for me to make nice with you. The super-handsome shopkeeper has a much thicker shell around his heart than any mobster on the street."

"What?"

"In my experience, grumpy people who are hard to approach tend to be amused by casual, friendly, and rude interactions, but I guess I misjudged the situation here. I still have a lot to learn. A-hem!"

With an exaggerated cough to change the atmosphere, Matsuoka straightened her back. The big smile that had been plastered on her face instantly became serious.

Masamichi was surprised by the sudden change, but Shino didn't move—not even a strand of his hair swayed. He continued staring at her.

She bowed deeply, then held out her business card with both hands, much more politely than she had with Masamichi.

"Please accept my apology for my unannounced visits and rude behavior. My name is Yumiko Matsuoka, and I am a freelance writer."

It appeared that she had only been *pretending* to be impolite. She was now overly polite and businesslike, her head bowed, her card still in her hand as she froze in that position.

Bracing himself, Masamichi bent down and whispered in Shino's ear.

“Um, Shino? The least you could do is accept her card.”

Shino’s eyes immediately emitted a fierce glare.

“What the hell, Masamichi? Have you been communicating with this woman without my knowledge?”

“O-o-of course not! No way! This is the second time I’m meeting Miss Matsuoka, same as you.”

“Then why are you trying to cover for her? Do you wish to betray me?”

“I’m not covering for her. I’m, uh...”

When Shino rebuked him harshly, Masamichi’s energy immediately seeped out of him, leaving him at a loss for words.

Being a specter, Shino certainly wasn’t two-faced. He wouldn’t give anyone false compliments, even if it killed him, and he always spoke his mind. Masamichi wasn’t good at communicating with others, but Shino was quite easy to get along with since he didn’t need to consider hidden meanings or nuances.

Because of that, he had become more talkative—only with Shino, of course—to say what was on his mind, but he still couldn’t get used to Shino’s violent rage.

What he wanted to say now was that treating a writer too poorly might lead to negative press, which could result in undesirable circumstances, so he should at least be a little more careful. But that writer was standing before them, and Shino was upset.

Masamichi did not have the advanced skills of discreetly warning Shino...so all he could do was hang his head like a coward.

But Matsuoka must have anticipated that Shino wouldn’t immediately accept her business card. She pulled it back and placed it on top of a small package she had produced from her bag.

This time, she offered the package and card to Shino. It was a long, narrow box with simple wrapping.

“This is to thank you for the umbrella I stole, to apologize for my rude

behavior the other day, and to extend my best wishes. I hope you will accept it.”

“It’s a small package for all that.”

“Sh-Shino.”

Despite Masamichi’s panic, Matsuoka looked up and smiled.

“It’s said that a big wicker basket contains bad things.”

Hearing her witty response, the vertical wrinkles between Shino’s eyebrows disappeared for the first time.

“Humph. So it’s *a small wicker basket*. You’ve gone to the trouble of bringing only the correct answers, huh?”

“That’s part of how I feel. I ordered and brought you something that is definitely tasty... I mean, what I consider to be wonderful.”

Masamichi looked at her in surprise.

“You went to the trouble of ordering them?”

“They’re tough to come by at the shop. To be sure, I ordered them after my first visit here. They are very good marble cookies, so I hope you’ll try them.”

As expected, she spoke more casually to Masamichi, but her tone was much more relaxed.

“Marble cookies that are tough to come by...from Michiko Yamamoto’s shop?”

“Bingo! You know your sweets!”

To Matsuoka’s surprise, Shino knew about the cookies.

“I’ve never tasted them, but a customer told me about them. They promised to bring them next time, but that was the last I heard from him.”

Still looking grim, Shino grabbed the package with one hand.

“You aren’t half as bad as a guy who breaks his word, bringing this when I haven’t even asked for it. Not that there’s much meaning in comparing bad to worse.”

Despite his harsh comment, Shino held the package and took the business card on top of it. After taking a glance at both sides, he opened his desk drawer.

Without a word, he brusquely pulled out the same business card he always gave his clients at business meetings and shoved it at Matsuoka.

“I’m Shino Tatsumi, owner of Bougyoudou.”

*Wow, he’s softening up. He’s even introducing himself.*

Masamichi put a hand to his chest in relief.

But the degree of relief must have been much greater for Matsuoka. She immediately smiled again and carefully yet quickly accepted the card.

“Thank you! Mr. Shino Tatsumi. I finally know your name. Um, and you are—”

“Oh, I’m Masa—”

“You don’t have to tell her your name,” Shino said coldly when Masamichi tried to tell Matsuoka his name, then pointed at him lightly with his chin.

“You can do your cookies’ worth of talking.”

As soon as he said that, a stool he kicked jumped from under the desk and stopped in front of Matsuoka. It was a too-rough indication that he didn’t mind if she sat, but she thanked him happily and took a seat without hesitation.

“Thank you! I’m glad to accept your kind offer.”

Masamichi felt her undying determination to make the most of the opportunity.

“So? I will listen if you want anything besides doing a story on my store.”

“...That’s still a no go?”

“Of course it is.”

“It’s such a nice place.”

She sounded regretful, then turned around and looked at the piles of items behind her. It didn’t sound to Masamichi like she was trying flattery; he thought she meant what she said.

Matsuoka returned her gaze to Shino and asked, “Have you seen the



magazine I left here last week? Not that I'm hoping you have."

"Magazine? I know nothing about it," he replied curtly.

"What?! I left it here on your desk before I took off!"

"I said I know nothing about it... Hey, Masamichi. Don't tell me you—"

Masamichi realized Shino was suspicious of him and had started tiptoeing off to the side. He croaked, "Sorry!" when Shino stared at him.

"I was curious, and...I was sure you'd tell me to throw it away if you saw it, so I took it to my room and read it."

"Bastard."

"I'm sorry! I'll bring it right back. Miss Matsuoka, I'll give it back to you."

Matsuoka put up her palm to stop him.

"It's okay. You can keep it if you like. I brought it here expecting to give it to you as a sample. How did you like it?"

As Matsuoka looked at him with hope, Masamichi felt caught between her and Shino's gazes but answered honestly, "It was my first time reading a girls' magazine. I don't wear makeup and I'm not interested in fashion."

"Oh, okay, that makes sense. I guess it wouldn't be interesting for a boy. Sorry, silly question."

"Oh, but wait! The sticky notes marked the pages you wrote, right? I thought the part about Taiwanese sweets was very interesting... I mean, uh..." Never a good talker, Masamichi struggled to find the right words despite his tension. "They looked delicious. I wanted to try them myself."

Matsuoka smiled. Unlike the smile she showed during her previous visit, it was natural, like a flower blooming.

Her rude behavior must have been her way of arming herself, or maybe it was the flip side of her nervousness.

"That's the best feedback I could expect! Thank you. It makes me very happy. Some people write reviews without much thought, but I always taste what I write about myself before asking for an interview. It isn't only food. I always do

a preliminary inspection. People say I'm a fool to do that for the amount of money I get paid for my work, but I'm partial to doing it my way."

"Oh, that's why. You were specific about the flavors, so I wanted to try them."

"Mm-hmm, I'm very happy to hear that. Genuinely happy. I'm so grateful, I could fall in love with you."

"Huh?!"

Masamichi felt nervous hearing her straightforward words of gratitude since he wasn't used to having people express affection for him. That was when Shino grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

"That's nothing to be proud of. It's to be expected."

Unable to maintain her tough exterior, Matsuoka pouted.

"Well, yes, okay! Boy, a righteous man is hard to appease. But...never mind that. What drives me when I write—not only for that magazine but all my reporting—is the desire to tell people about things. Whether it's gourmet food, fashion, or general goods, I do my best when I write because I want to share the information with others."

"So what?"

"The same goes for this store. When I read a rumor on social media that there was an antique shop with a super-handsome owner who sold lucky items for love, I admit my curiosity was piqued. I thought it sounded like a good story and couldn't pass it up."

Frankly confiding in them, Matsuoka glanced over to see Shino's reaction.

He was as motionless as ice and said nothing, but Masamichi felt relieved.

*Shino hates lies and sycophants, but I have a feeling he doesn't really get angry at people who speak their minds, even if they're rude. Of course, he has a short fuse, so he's certainly scary.*

He had earlier been reprimanded for admitting to having hidden the magazine, but he didn't think it was the type of anger that would last for long.

"But the moment I stepped in here to check the place out, it came to me.

Right here,” Matsuoka said, putting her hand on a spot slightly too far to the left to indicate her heart. She continued seriously, “To be honest, I imagined an antique store to be more elegant. Old, expensive-looking items would be placed delicately on clean shelves, and you’d have an elderly man with a dour look staring at customers, putting tags on them as he would antiques...”

“That’s biased.”

Matsuoka immediately agreed.

“Exactly. It was refreshing as much as surprising to find my bias shattered to smithereens when I set foot in this place. I was overwhelmed by the piles of goods and surprised by how young the two of you are. But this *is* a strange place. It’s dimly lit, with an overwhelming feeling of oppression and a distinct smell peculiar to old things...but very calming. It somehow feels nostalgic,” Matsuoka said as she glanced around the store again.

Curious, Masamichi asked her a question. “Nostalgic? Did you grow up surrounded by old things?”

Matsuoka looked at the piles of things and shook her head with a smile.

“No, I didn’t. I grew up in an apartment in the city, so it isn’t like I’m remembering things from the past and connecting them to your store... Maybe it’s strange, but I felt like I had come to a place where there were people I knew a long time ago.”

Shino’s eyes widened slightly. Whether fortunate or not, Matsuoka, who had her back turned to him, didn’t notice the minute change in his expression.

“People you knew a long time ago, huh?”

Perhaps sensing the somewhat amused note in Shino’s voice, Matsuoka turned with a wry smile and shrugged.

“It’s odd, isn’t it—when I’m seeing all the items here for the first time. But it’s true, though I got carried away and acted rudely because I wanted teenage girls to be exposed to your store’s warm, unique atmosphere and see the different world that existed so close to them.”

“Maybe there’s still hope for you if you know that. Anyway, cut the nonsense

and get to the point. I'm not interested in your feelings."

With Shino urging her to go on, Matsuoka sat up straight on her stool, let out a small breath, and began talking again.

"I still want to feature this store in my magazine. However, all kinds of people read magazines, and you never know who might get interested in this place. I don't intend to have many window-shoppers come here and ruin the atmosphere or cause trouble for you. Perhaps a teen magazine isn't the right media for your store."

"Then give it up."

Matsuoka wasn't intimidated by Shino's comment and said in a stronger tone, "Maybe this isn't the right time. But I will never forget this place and never give up. Someday, when I get a job with a media platform that I feel would be appropriate, please let me come and negotiate again for an interview. I'll come, even if you don't want me to!"

Concerned, Masamichi looked from Matsuoka to Shino.

After a brief silence, Shino said as if he couldn't care less, "Do what you want."

"Thank you!"

Matsuoka beamed joyfully, but Shino added, "I have no right to limit your actions. If I don't like it, I'll keep kicking you out as often as necessary."

"I accept the challenge!"

Matsuoka's chest swelled with happiness.

*This is one strong lady. I'm curious if all reporters are like that. Or is it just her?*

When Shino ruthlessly pointed to the door, Masamichi looked at her like she was stunning.

"Go home now if you're done here."

"Shino. Let's at least offer her tea."

"There is no need to entertain someone who has stolen my time for their gain."

“Ngh...”

Watching the exchange between master and servant with interest, Matsuoka said, “I have one more favor to ask before I go.”

“What?”

“The lucky items of love that you choose for teenage girls? Do they work for things besides love...?”

Shino sighed as if exasperated. Masamichi hesitantly tried to explain.

“Oh, that. Um, the first girl who came here happened to get a boyfriend after her visit, and that rumor spread about our things being *lucky items for love*. That’s all.”

“What do you mean?”

“To be more accurate, they’re items that bring you good luck if you care for them with all your heart...right, Shino?”

All Shino did was blink. He didn’t even bother to look at Masamichi.

Matsuoka’s eyes widened in surprise. Along with the freckles on her face, it made her look like a startled fawn.

“So that’s the story. *If you care for them with all your heart*, huh? That’s nice. It sounds a little spiritual. What if someone didn’t do that?”

This time, Shino responded. “They would presumably be met with bad luck.”

His response was as quick as litmus paper, and Matsuoka shuddered a little.

“It’s also a bit of a horror story! But it’s natural to take care of something you’ve wanted. Uh, could you look for something for me? A lucky item?”

“What is your wish?”

Matsuoka shrugged, her face still serious. Then she shyly confided, “I’d like a little luck in my work.”

“In your work? I saw you as the type of woman who would want to get recognition for your abilities, but I suppose I was wrong.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. I intend to do that. But I have this particular

situation.” She cut herself off there and lowered her voice. “The work I get now is writing about introductions to various products and events. To differentiate myself from other writers, I routinely walk around the area looking for little-known stories that might become big. And...this spring, I heard about a mysterious incident with a bit of a horror note, like an urban legend.”

“About what?”

Matsuoka folded her hands in prayer to Masamichi’s question.

“Let me keep the details a secret. I was intrigued, and as I followed up on the case, I found some interesting things. If I could get to the bottom of it or at least unveil the truth, I might get a job doing the gritty, hard-core journalism I’ve always wanted. I don’t care if it’s a weekly magazine or newspaper. I want to get into crime reporting.”

Shino raised a brow sarcastically.

“So, in your mind, crime reporting is more important than introducing Taiwanese sweets.”

Matsuoka looked flustered and shook her head.

“No! That’s not what I mean. I love what I do now. I’ve never once considered writing for teen magazines or town papers—boring. But...but, um.”

Matsuoka clammed up in a way that seemed unlike her, bit her lip, looked down, and remained silent for a while. But perhaps making up her mind, she looked into Shino’s eyes and opened her mouth.

“During my second year in junior high, my father was killed in a hit-and-run accident on his way home from work.”

“...!”

Shino didn’t react, but Masamichi gasped.

“I’m sure the police did their best to investigate, but they never found the culprit. I’m very grateful to my mother for working hard and sending me to high school, but life has always been tough. And because we don’t know who killed Dad, neither my mother nor I had anyone we could blame to take out our anger, our frustration, and our sadness on. We kept everything bottled up in

our hearts, and we'd clash with each other—the only family we have—when we couldn't take it anymore. It was very painful. It still is.”

“Miss Matsuoka...”

Matsuoka's confession struck a chord with Masamichi, particularly because he had almost died in a hit-and-run accident a few months earlier.

*Maybe...I would have made my parents feel the same way if I hadn't met Shino and died there.*

The thought chilled him to the bone, and Masamichi relished his good fortune to have met Shino.

Matsuoka noticed the change in his expression and apologized.

“I'm sorry. You don't want to be suddenly told such a dark story, do you? But that's why I aim for a career reporting crime and incidents, Mr. Tatsumi.”

Matsuoka wiped a tear from the corner of her eye.

“I'm not saying one type of reporting is more important. I know how tough and painful it is not knowing the truth. That's why I know I can write stories that no one else can. I want to believe that. It's the kind of work I want to do. That's why I will expose the case I'm now following, write a story, and sell it.”

“Do you have connections to do that?”

Matsuoka nodded.

“Fortunately, several newspaper and magazine reporters are interested in and appreciate my magazine articles. I want to take advantage of those contacts and seize an opportunity. They say luck is a part of your skills. So whether it's by praying to God or superstition, I will use everything I have. And if a lucky item will help, I'd love to ask for one. I'll take good care of it. I promise.”

Shino subtly smiled for the first time since Matsuoka had entered his store.

“That enthusiasm is good.”

“Huh?!”

Shino stood up with a clatter despite Matsuoka's surprise at his positive

assessment.

“People in this country tend to consider it a virtue to be modest and humble. Indeed, hiding one’s true feelings is a strategy, and there are things that one may obtain by behaving without letting others know what one wants. But,” Shino said with a detached tone as he approached a pile of goods, “desire is power. The desire that comes out of the darkness in your soul will be the power that guides you, as long as you don’t let that darkness sweep you off your feet.”

“Mr. Tatsumi...”

“Light and darkness are two sides of the same coin. Darkness cannot be born without light, and without darkness, light cannot be recognized for what it truly is.”

As he spoke, Shino used only the movement of his eyes to tell Matsuoka to approach him. Her aggressive demeanor was gone, and she timidly walked up to him.

Masamichi stood a little distance away so as not to disturb them.

“You said earlier that you felt a sense of *nostalgia* here.”

“Yes...I did.”

“Is there a particular object that gives you that sense? It doesn’t matter whether it is familiar. Just look for something that makes you feel nostalgic.”

“Regardless of whether it’s familiar...? How can I feel nostalgic about something that isn’t familiar?”

Matsuoka muttered her concerns as she proceeded toward the door, carefully examining the items piled high on her left and right.

Masamichi held his breath and watched her eventually stop and stare at a particular point. A dubious look appeared on her face.

“I don’t know why, but I feel nostalgic about this.”

“Which item?”

“This one.”

She showed Shino and Masamichi a small fan sitting on a table she had almost



bumped her shoulder against when she came inside.

“Hmm.”

Shino took the fan. Masamichi came to his side and looked at it.

The fan’s leaves were revealed when Shino carefully unfolded the bamboo guard.

The ivory fabric was painted with ripples on the surface of water, modest plants, and three killifish. The brushwork was clear, and the artwork was more charming than beautiful.

“It’s probably a child’s fan from the 1960s,” Shino said. “Manufacturers started using plastic to make these in the 1970s.”

“I wonder if it was used for *shichi-go-san*, celebrating children’s passage into middle childhood.”

“Perhaps it was since it doesn’t appear to have been used much. Have you ever owned something like this?”

Matsuoka was quick to say, “No.” Then she continued, “Never. Electric fans are cooler than these paper fans.”

The specter that had existed for over a thousand years snorted at the response, so typical of people in modern society.

“Hold it in your hand.”

“You don’t mind?” She carefully accepted the open fan Shino brusquely handed her and said solemnly, “Strange. I’ve never seen it, but I feel increasingly attached to it when I hold it. It’s as if I’m being reunited with a friend I’ve always been with but somehow got separated from.”

“Is that so? That sense of nostalgia may be like a connection from a previous life. Or maybe it’s simply tremendous chemistry,” Shino said, nodding. Then he declared, “It will be your lucky item. Take it with you.”

“Huh?! This is my lucky item?”

“As long as you cherish it. That nostalgia will one day become a stable connection, and the fan will protect you, hoping it will never have to leave you,

its new master.”

Shino’s explanation didn’t seem to make much sense to Matsuoka. Still, she looked at the fan with delight.

“This. Mine. Uh...do you always identify lucky charms like this?”

“It’s no trouble if one can find their lucky item as you have. But there are others for whom I must find something.”

Shino’s answer was as simple as can be.

Still curiously stroking the fan with her fingertips, Matsuoka slowly closed it and smiled as she held it in both hands.

“I had a suspicion that the lucky item thing was just a cheap way to get rid of junk, but after experiencing this, I’ve realized that it isn’t like that. Sorry.” Going to the trouble of confiding what Shino and Masamichi wouldn’t have known if she hadn’t told them, Matsuoka stroked the slippery bamboo bone of her fan as if still rejoicing in her reunion with an old friend. “Rather than creating connections between old items and people today, it’s more like finding and telling people about an invisible thread from the past, isn’t it? That’s how I feel. Oh...I must pay for this.”

“I don’t need payment,” said Shino curtly, already back at his desk.

“But...”

“You brought me cookies. That is the price for the fan. I don’t like owing people.”

Shino casually lifted the box of cookies that remained on the desk.

“It isn’t like owing or borrowing... Oh, never mind. Thank you.”

Matsuoka had good intuition and seemed to have guessed from the previous exchanges that it would be wise to accept Shino’s generosity without fuss. She bowed with a smile and carefully slipped the slender fan into the inside pocket of her jacket.

“This will be my buddy when I go out for coverage. That alone is reassuring.”

She walked around and stood in front of Shino, slung the huge tote bag she

had left on the stool over her shoulder, and bowed deeply to Shino and Masamichi.

“I’ve caused you much trouble but look forward to seeing you again. Please allow me to drop by now and then so you won’t forget me. I’ll come and tell you if I get a job doing a news story!”

“...You don’t have to come.”

“I will! Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Shino didn’t look happy, but it didn’t bother Matsuoka. She bid him farewell with a radiant look on her face and left even more fearlessly than when she’d arrived.

Shino shook his head and sat on his chair.

“That woman just doesn’t listen to what others say.”

Masamichi chuckled.

“But you sort of like her, don’t you?”

“Who, me?”

“You wouldn’t have given her a lucky item for free if you didn’t. You said the cookies were the price of the fan, but you wouldn’t have given it to her if you weren’t convinced it wouldn’t make the artifact spirit within that fan happy.”

“...Well, that’s true.”

Shino grudgingly agreed.

“I got a different impression of her today, too. Before, I thought she was rude and overzealous, but maybe she’s as shy as I am. Maybe she gets excited when she’s nervous.”

“How can you tell? What kind of person would do a strange thing like that?”

As he walked up the stairs to the tea room, Masamichi replied, “I just feel that way. I’m not good at socializing and felt like I could relate with her...”

“Humph. So you felt a kinship as a fellow hit-and-run victim.”

“It isn’t like that! Well, maybe there’s a little of that, but...shall I make tea?”

We can open that box of cookies she brought.”

“All right,” Shino replied, and Masamichi went to the kitchen and washed his hands.

Shino brought the cookies to the tea room table and sat on his usual cushion.

“The case that woman said she’s going after...”

“Hmm? Did you say something, Shino?”

Masamichi was putting an iron kettle on the stove and preparing tea utensils so he couldn’t hear everything Shino was saying.

“No, nothing. I’d better get some work done before tasting the sweets she said were so good.” With that, Shino moved the box of cookies to the side and took out a long, narrow wooden box that had been left next to the cushion since the previous night.

Though the box had turned slightly darker, it looked like it had initially been made of white wood. It was tied with a flat braid in a crisscross pattern that had also faded to yellow.

“Work?” Masamichi asked curiously, and Shino wiggled a finger to prompt him to come to the table.

“I’ll finish by the time the water has boiled. Come here and give me a hand.”

Surprised but somewhat pleased, Masamichi replied, “Okay,” turned down the heat on the stove, and went to the tea room.

“What do you want me to do? I don’t know how to appraise antiques.”

“I’m well aware of that. Sit there.”

“O-okay.”

He sat up straight on his cushion.

Shino carelessly pushed the wooden box toward him.

“Open it.”

“This box?”

Masamichi closely examined the wooden box in front of him.

With its long side placed vertically, the box was similar in size and shape to one his grandmother used for storing her treasured flower vases. It wasn't small enough to handle with one hand, but it would be easy to carry with both.

It looked old, but nothing was striking about it...is what Masamichi thought until he realized something peculiar and gasped.

The shallow lid was firmly shut and sealed with thin paper tape around its four sides.

Upon closer inspection, he saw it wasn't just regular tape.

Masamichi asked, "Is this a talisman?" He tensed.

Several letters on the paper were too expertly written for Masamichi to make out, and a geometric pattern connected dots with lines.

He had seen something similar in this store several times.

"Isn't this what you call a 'sealed' item?" he guessed.

Shino answered matter-of-factly, "Yeah."

"You mean...there's something in here that had to be sealed? Like a spirit?"

"That's right. Don't worry. It's no big deal."

"Hey, maybe it isn't a big deal to you, but I'm just an average human, okay? Why do I have to...?" Masamichi was about to ask why he had to open it. But as Shino's servant, he thought it was rude to question his master. Despite swallowing his words, question marks practically appeared all around him.

But Shino coldly repeated his order to open the box.

"Hurry up. The water's about to boil."

Masamichi gulped.

Hearing that a spirit was locked in the box reminded him of the time he carelessly dropped a doll from a store shelf and almost got strangled to death by the enraged artifact spirit inside. No one would call him a coward if he looked scared to death.

"What will happen to me if I open it?"

“If something happens, I’ll handle it. Now open it.”

“...That isn’t reassuring at all.”

Still, a master’s order was to be obeyed.

Furthermore, hearing about Matsuoka’s father losing his life in a hit-and-run accident made Masamichi all the more grateful to Shino for saving his life.

*Shino says I’m good food to him so he wouldn’t kill me that easily. If I can help him in any way, I...guess I have no choice.*

Swallowing hard, Masamichi took a deep breath, then gently touched the box with both hands.

It felt old. The grooves were dry and shallow. But it didn’t seem particularly unpleasant.

*Maybe it’s because of the seal—which I’m about to break.*

“This...seal. Can I break it with my hands?”

“I don’t care.”

Shino’s instructions couldn’t be clearer.

Masamichi encouraged his trembling fingers to be brave and broke the first seal. Then he pulled his fingernail into the small gap between the box and lid. The thin Japanese paper tore easily.

He was done with the first layer.

Nothing in particular seemed to happen, and Masamichi felt a little relieved. He rotated the box and turned another side of it toward him.

The second part of the seal broke just as easily.

*Rustle.*

He thought he heard a small sound coming from inside the box.

“Sh-Shino.”

The specter coldly scolded his frightened servant. “Stop dawdling.”

Masamichi desperately suppressed his desire to run away and tore the third seal.

*Clatter!*

This time, something definitely moved inside the box.

“Whoa!”

“Shut up. Stop hesitating and open it.”

“B-but...”

“It won’t kill you.”

*It doesn’t help to guarantee that the worst won’t happen!*

There were tons of things Masamichi wanted to say. But Masamichi inadvertently realized the annoying fact that, beneath the fear he felt, there was a tinge of curiosity buzzing inside him.

He wanted to know what was in the box.

He wanted to know what would happen when he opened it.

Masamichi wondered where that kind of morbid curiosity came from.

Perhaps he had gotten used to the strange, unexpected things he had been experiencing since meeting Shino.

*I mean, I watched Shino gnawing at my leg when I was dying and even heard him comment about how it tasted. I don’t think anything worse could happen that easily.*

He doubted if anyone else in the world had ever experienced anything like that, and the thought made him oddly relaxed.

*This can’t be as bad as that. Definitely not.*

He told himself that as he finally placed the last sealed surface before him.

He used his fingernails to rip the last part of the seal even more carefully than the other three sides.

*I’m almost done. Now all I have to do is open the lid.*

But as soon as his nails tore through the entire seal, Masamichi yelped.

He didn’t have to open the lid. The tightly closed top flew off with such force that it hit the cover of the light fixture above.

Masamichi had no time to look at Shino. The next moment, the wooden box shattered to pieces.

“Whoa!”

What appeared was a ceramic vase.

The smooth body was slightly curved with a constricted mouth. It didn’t look likely to hold many flowers.

The dark blue, almost navy glaze made the surface shine lustrously.

The gentle curves of the gold-plated joints around the mouth were beautiful, like a decoration that had always been there.

But Masamichi didn’t have the luxury of time or nerve to savor its beauty.

“Huh...?”

A long object that resembled an eel slithered from the mouth of the vase.

*Wh-what’s that? A fish? No, it’s—*

It looked shiny like an eel but was much thicker. The slimy cylindrical body was jet-black as if boiled in darkness, making it impossible to see if it had eyes.

The round part that appeared to be its head snapped open in front of Masamichi’s nose, with long, sharp, white fangs filling a gaping maw.

*Shino was right. This thing is an apparition!*

The monster swung its tip widely like a pendulum in front of Masamichi and began opening and closing its huge mouth.

It looked like the man-eating monsters that were often seen in silly horror flicks. But its appearance and movements, which may have looked funny in a movie, were horrifying in real life.

“No way... Whoa!!”

Momentarily stunned, Masamichi came to his senses and tried to get away from the vase and what had appeared from within it.

He cringed back in fear and shock, his hands and feet trembling, and was unable to make any significant movements. He merely thrashed about



helplessly like he was drowning in the open sea.

“Aaahh...!”

His mouth felt like cotton, his tongue dried up, and no words would come out. All that gushed from his throat was an animal-like cry of despair.

*It's going to eat me alive...!*

Masamichi was so scared that he wanted to close his eyes. But even the movements of his eyelids were beyond his control. All he could do was stare at the spirit, which was bent like a whip, its sharp fangs and gaping mouth coming closer and closer.

However.

Just when he thought the fangs would pierce his face, Shino got down on one knee and grabbed its torso like he was catching an insect.

Masamichi heard a sound coming from its mouth, but he couldn't tell if it was a screech or a roar. Like an eel, it wriggled and resisted violently as Shino pulled it out of the vase.

“Finally, it came out.”

As soon as he said that, Shino did the unthinkable.

He opened his mouth and bit into the spirit's head.

“Oh...oh. Oh!”

*You have got to be kidding. He could not have just... Ugh.*

Masamichi could do nothing but sit there, shocked to the bone, his fear too great to express in words.

Meanwhile, Shino gripped the spirit's long torso firmly as he sealed off any resistance and slowly pushed the thing's body down his throat.

Shino's beautiful face contorted violently. With his mouth opened so widely that Masamichi wondered if his jaw had been unhinged, Shino's teeth sank into the spirit's thick body and bit it into pieces.

The spirit's moans of pain coming from deep inside Shino's throat made Masamichi tremble.

*Predation.*

That was the word that came to mind.

*Is this...how a specter eats another specter?*

Ignoring Masamichi—who had fallen on his rear on the tatami mat, barely able to support himself with his hands—Shino shoved the entire spirit into his mouth, sighed, and wiped his lips with his shirt sleeve.

“It was bigger than I expected. And it tasted terrible,” Shino spat as he frowned and reached for the vase.

Masamichi managed to moisten his tongue and squeezed out a few words. “A-are you...okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“You ate that thing! Are you okay with that?”

Still unable to regain full control of his body, Masamichi crawled on the tatami mat and approached Shino.

Shino answered matter-of-factly, “It’s the same as when you humans eat food that isn’t good. You don’t feel good about it but soon digest it, and it becomes a part of you. That’s all there is to it. I could have killed it, but it would be somewhat useful for me to eat it, and that would have made the spirit happy. It’s what you humans call sustainability.”

“Is that what sustainability means...? Oh, never mind. Shino, why did you tell me to open the box?”

“I used you as bait.”

“...Huh?”

Looking satisfied, Shino stroked the smooth body of the vase as he said, “This vase was given to me free of charge by another antique dealer. It’s a good item but had been kept in a box for generations as a cursed item. They figured it would be an interesting conversation piece and displayed it in their guest room. The funny thing was, a cat that got into the house went near it and didn’t come back out, never to be seen again. They were spooked, wondering if it may have eaten the cat.”

“Eep!”

“It’s indeed a fine vase. And I knew right away that a spirit lurked inside. That’s why I accepted it and brought it here.”

Shino was back to his usual self, and as he continued explaining, Masamichi also gradually calmed down.

He watched Shino with astonishment as the specter gazed lovingly at the vase.

“So the cat was really eaten?”

“Probably.”

“Whoa... The spirit locked inside—it was that fat eel-like thing, wasn’t it? Wasn’t it an artifact spirit?”

“No, it wasn’t. That was just a lowly spirit. It didn’t have much power, but no human sorcerer could have handled it as it had slipped inside this vase.”

“Oh. That’s why the whole box was sealed?”

“Correct. A desperate measure.”

“...I’m beginning to understand this. And even with your power as a specter, you couldn’t force it to come out of the vase.”

Masamichi’s guess seemed correct since Shino affirmed it with an eyebrow raised in disapproval.

“The mouth of the vase is too narrow for my hand to fit. Yet it would have been a shame to break the vase. That’s why I resealed the box and forgot about it. I noticed it last night when I was sorting through our goods. I thought I might as well use you since you’re here.”

“Did you tell me to open the box because you thought the spirit, which wouldn’t come out because it would be afraid of you, would see me as food and come out?!”

“Sometimes, you catch on quickly.”

Shino grinned with satisfaction and placed the vase on the table.

“The spirit had been locked up for so long that I was sure it would be hungry. I

figured it would jump out and bite you if the seal was broken, and you were there in front of it.”

“And you caught it and ate it instead.”

“That’s right. You don’t know this, but the lower the class of a spirit, the worse it tastes. It’s been a while since I ate such a thing, and it has given me heartburn.”

Not regretting in the least the fact that he had used Masamichi as bait, Shino rubbed his stomach. He looked like a regular human.

Masamichi sighed so loudly that all the air in his lungs must have left him.

He knew it was meaningless to complain to a specter, but he wouldn’t be able to cope with something like this happening on a daily basis.

“Next time, at least explain things to me, okay? I want to be prepared.”

“Can you actually prepare yourself for something like this?” Shino asked him in surprise. His face was as beautiful as ever. The strength seemed to seep out of Masamichi as he observed that face and collapsed on the tatami mat.

“Maybe not, but it’s much too shocking. I was shocked to death and terrified.”

“Even you? After you almost died once before? You know that even if a spirit ate your limbs, I could put them back together again.”

“That isn’t the point! What’s scary is scary.”

“I don’t get it. You and Tokifuyu are both human, but you’re completely different. Tokifuyu wasn’t afraid of death.”

Still lying down in exhaustion, Masamichi turned to look at Shino in surprise.

“Really? Tokifuyu wasn’t afraid of dying? Wasn’t he just pretending he wasn’t scared?”

A faraway look appeared in Shino’s eyes as he said, “It must be the mercy of the gods and Buddha that the day one’s life ends isn’t far away. *‘How pitiful you are, a specter that must live far longer than a human being.’*”

“...Huh?!”

“That’s what Tokifuyu used to say. I had no idea what he was thinking, but I

knew he meant what he said. He said death was a mercy.”

“Death was a mercy...?”

“You’re a human being, just like him. Don’t you understand what he meant?”

“No way. I don’t want to die yet, and I don’t want anyone in my family to die, either,” Masamichi said, surprised.

The corners of Shino’s mouth twitched upward a fraction and he muttered, “People are impossible to understand.” Then he switched topics. “The water boiled ages ago. As a reward for fulfilling your role as bait for that spirit, I’ll make you a pot of tea.”

With that, Shino strolled off to the kitchen.

“A cup of tea is all I get as a reward for putting my life on the line?”

Masamichi couldn’t help whining. But strangely enough, he felt no resentment.

He was angry that his life had been treated so carelessly. Still, he was also fully aware that Shino had done something outrageous because he was confident in his ability to protect Masamichi no matter what.

*So this is what it’s like to be associated with a specter. I keep forgetting because he seems like a regular person, but he’s fundamentally different from me.*

Masamichi closed his eyes feebly, and his mind filled with image after image of how Shino had devoured his flesh and blood and almost raped him to eat him as *food*.

*Thinking I was getting used to living with a specter was presumptuous. I haven’t gotten used to it at all. I still know nothing about him.*

Perhaps similar things would continue to happen in the future.

Masamichi felt gloomy, thinking that his mental strength would be tested and his body would be treated as a mere tool in the days to come. Yet he didn’t want to run away from Shino.

He was curious about feeling that way on the one hand and understood it on

the other.

*It isn't just because he saved my life or became my master. For some reason, when I'm with Shino, I...feel like I can't leave him alone.*

Masamichi opened his eyes and stared at the specter, who was carefully brewing tea in the kitchen.

*He's cruel, but he can sometimes be nice, and he's disciplined... He's a weird person. I mean, specter.*

The fragrant and slightly burnt aroma unique to Kyo-bancha tickled Masamichi's nose as he remained prone on the tatami mat. It was something else that he never would have known if he hadn't met Shino.

"Hey, how long are you going to lie there? Unwrap that box of cookies."

As usual, Shino barked an order without sparing him a glance, and Masamichi gave him an unenthusiastic reply, "Okaaay," and slowly raised himself to a sitting position...

## CHAPTER 4

### Threads Tangled Together

It was an image of running, *thud, thud, thud...*, on the long, dusty porch.

Or perhaps he wasn't running. Possibly crawling. The floor surface was awfully close to his face.

Nevertheless, he was moving too quickly to be crawling.

*Oh. Maybe I'm...yeah. I thought so.*

Masamichi realized that he'd guessed right and smiled...or so he thought.

His gaze moved a little, and he saw his hands placed on a rag.

*I'm wiping the floor with a rag! But why in the world am I doing something like that? We don't have a long hallway like this in the house. Where am I?*

He must have been wiping the floor with vigor...with all his might. Masamichi couldn't hide his bewilderment at the powerful sight before him as he charged at breakneck speed, pushing the rag against the wooden floor.

But the hands on the rag didn't look familiar.

His master, Shino, had subtly remade the hands he now possessed.

Shino had said, *"I thought your fingers should be a little longer, considering the balance of your body as a whole,"* and that he had *"stretched them a little longer"* like it was the most natural thing in the world.

It seemed to be a show of Shino's goodwill or an attempt to make his servant look a little better while *mending* his battered body back together after his hit-and-run accident.

Masamichi's fingertips would unintentionally bump into something now and then, and he had become somewhat clumsy. But he quickly got used to his improved hands since they were body parts he used daily.

And recently, he'd been able to use them without any particular discomfort.

The hands he was now observing were considerably different from those *new hands*.

The hands before him were a size larger than his own. The fingers were long and slender, and the thin flesh made the joints stand out.

*They aren't my hands. Could they be—*

Just as Masamichi came up with a possibility, he heard a soft male voice accompanied by quiet footsteps.

"I'm back. Oh, my. Haven't you finished cleaning the eaves yet?"

The scene did a full pan.

Standing at the end of his line of sight was a man who looked like he had come out of an ancient picture scroll.

*What...is he wearing? Hunting clothes? No, they're a little more formal. And what about that hat? It isn't the headgear you often see court nobles wearing; it's shorter. It has something like a pair of disposable chopsticks tied at the front and a tail-like thing sticking out the back. Oh, I know. It's the emperor doll in a hina doll set, the ones put up in some Japanese homes on March 3 to celebrate Girls' Day.*

Masamichi recalled his mother telling him that the hina dolls she displayed at the entrance of their home each year were for herself since she didn't have a daughter.

"Have you been taking advantage of my absence to sleep in? Do not get lazy just because your master is away," the man warned in a soft tone, more teasingly than reprimanding, as his face came into view.

He had a pale, oval-shaped face with simple features that looked like they had been painted with a brush and ink by a skilled artist. He was still young, with a somewhat mischievous smile and a thoughtful, unassuming look in his eyes.

No matter how you looked at it, the man was dressed as a nobleman of the Heian period. Masamichi gasped. The man seemed somewhat plain overall, wearing an old robe but with many fine patches when you looked closely.



*Could he be...Shino's late master?*

As if to back up his thought, Masamichi heard Shino's raspy voice.

"Tokifuyu, you didn't tell me to work without rest. You didn't tell me when I needed to finish, either. That's why I slept as long as I wanted. Be grateful that I started working after that."

*I can hear Shino's voice coming from my body. No, wait a minute. This is Shino's body. I've been seeing things from Shino's perspective.*

Finally understanding what was going on, Masamichi clapped happily in his mind to congratulate himself.

*This is the Heian period; that man is Tokifuyu Tatsumi—Shino's master—and I'm in the body of Shino back then. That's the only way it makes sense. But I wonder...if something like that can really happen.*

Tokifuyu Tatsumi wasn't angry with his rude servant. Instead, he sighed, and his shoulders slumped.

"You shouldn't be such a sore loser," Tokifuyu said. "All the help has taken off scared to death since I took you in. This may be a small house, but you and I must manage it together now."

Shino then tossed the rag and sat cross-legged.

"What does it matter? Your staff would not have left if you hadn't made me your servant on a whim. It's all your fault and none of my business. I am just one of those who have suffered because of you."

*He's sulking!*

Masamichi nervously awaited the results of Shino's rude behavior with his master.

But the exchange must have been an everyday occurrence for master and servant. Tokifuyu looked up at the sky dramatically.

"Really. You always have something to say back to me. I suppose one of the dead who became the source of your soul had a sharp tongue. All right, then. I will join you in cleaning the house before I start my reading. At least help me change my apparel so I can do that; then I will give you some sweets I brought

back. I saw a child selling *itabi* on my way home today. The one I tried was sweet, so I bought some for you.”

With that, Tokifuyu went into the back of the house.

“Don’t think you can use me for the price of figs!” Shino spat angrily. Still, he must have figured it was better than wiping the floor. Or perhaps he was attracted by the sweets.

Shino got to his feet surprisingly smoothly and ran after his master.

*Hmm. I wonder what “itabi” is. It sounded like something dried...dried figs? Maybe Shino has always liked sweet things...*

Masamichi watched with a smile when Tokifuyu entered what appeared to be his living room, removed his hat, and carefully placed it on his writing desk.

“Oh, brother. You fastened the *motoyui* string so tightly around my hair that it gives me a headache. Hurry up and undo it, or my hair will fall out.”

The complaining man had a small, tightly knotted bun at the top of his head. Shino was much taller than Tokifuyu and carelessly cut the white string with scissors. A dozen strands of hair fell with the string onto the floor, but neither man seemed bothered.

“You are wrong to have a specter such as I cut your hair with scissors. What if I used the tip of this blade to stab you in the neck from behind?”

Tokifuyu smoothed his long hair with his hands and laughed mildly at the specter’s justifiable complaint.

“Nothing. You do not have the power to defy the curse and harm me now, though I do not know about the future. Oh, that feels much better. I do not care if others tease me, saying I look like a child. It is best to let my hair down.”

This time, Shino got down on one knee as his master continued to speak and began roughly undoing the sash that fastened the man’s robe.

“Tokifuyu, you are too easygoing,” he said. “I heard that people at the Spiritual Mediums Bureau are frowning at you for making me a servant. The last attendant you had, before he left since he had no chance of getting promoted, said so. You could have taken credit if you had quickly exorcised me and risen to

a better position. It still isn't too late."

"Oh? Are you worried about me? You are unexpectedly kind, aren't you? I am glad to discover that. I will give you two *itabi* instead of one."

"Don't be silly! I wouldn't worry about you even if the Suzakumon gate were to split in two. I'm just truly annoyed by being trapped in this frustrating life!"

"Is that so? I think it is quite a fine life that I have set up for you with my heart and soul. I give you food, clothe you, teach you to read and write... I think I have done everything I can. My servant is indeed difficult to please."

"Shut up! I'm not pleased with everything you have forced upon me!"

"Oh? I wonder who ate all the sweetfish I bought myself as an appetizer, saying it was delicious. I think you at least seem to like human food."

Tokifuyu covered his mouth with his sleeve and laughed, recalling that scene. A loud *thump, thump* was heard, probably Shino stomping his feet in frustration.

"Shut up! I don't need you to give me sweetfish. I can catch and eat as much as I want from a river! Humph. Why do humans wear such complicated robes? What meaning is there to tying things up and tucking things in here, there, and everywhere? And you can't even put it on by yourself!"

This time, Shino stood up and sloppily removed the man's outer robe, clicking his tongue and complaining.

Tokifuyu responded with a laid-back smile.

"I have to agree. Our robes are too uncomfortable with useless features. I imagine that in the future, people's mainstay garments will become easier to wear and not so flashy. You are a specter that will live much longer than I will, so perhaps you will wear such comfortable clothes one day. I envy you that."

"Are you kidding? I will say good-bye to such *garments* when you die! I will return to the fields and live freely again. I will never again wear such things as clothes!"

"...Hmm?"

Masamichi's eyes popped open in the dark.

He was in a daze momentarily, unsure of where he was.

He could still hear echoes of Shino's voice as he yipped at his master like a noisy puppy.

*Huh? Oh, I get it. I must have been dreaming. No wonder.*

Noticing the thin summer comforter covering his body, Masamichi fidgeted and pulled out his right hand.

There was no mistaking that it was the now all-too-familiar hand that Shino had *improved*.

*What a dream. I was in Shino's body, saw his master through his eyes, and spoke with him through Shino's mouth and ears. I don't even know what Tokifuyu looks like, but I guess I imagined his appearance. Shino might get mad at me if I tell him about it. I'll... Oh.*

Masamichi slipped his hand back under the comforter, looked up, and realized he was looking up at a braided ceiling.

The ceiling in his room was planked with cedar, and its leaky stains stood out.

The ceiling overhead was beautifully crafted, meaning...

*I'm in Shino's room. Oh yeah.*

He slowly turned his head to look around him and breathed a faint sigh.

Lying next to him with his eyes closed was none other than Shino.

Masamichi finally remembered going to bed in Shino's room the previous night after being told to give the specter some of his *energy*.

*He tells me to come here about once a week, so I've probably gotten used to sleeping in his room.* The muscles around his mouth relaxed.

Shino says he isn't taking so much of Masamichi's *energy* that it would endanger his life, but Masamichi always felt drained since it was like having his life force sucked out of him. It was no wonder he fell into a deep sleep afterward.

It hadn't been like that initially, and he had difficulty sleeping. But recently, he surprised himself by how easily he could zonk out.

It wasn't just his body. Both physically and mentally, Masamichi had gotten used to being with Shino. He was now looking forward to laying their pillows side by side to the extent that he could push the slight fear, anxiety, and caution he felt about Shino far back in his mind.

Masamichi didn't know what Shino meant when he said his *energy* tasted good.

Still, Shino was in a slightly better mood than usual while enjoying his *energy*, and the conversations they couldn't usually manage became relatively effortless.

As for Masamichi, it seemed more and more like a shame to fall asleep because he could practice talking about himself to another person and also learn a little more about Shino's long history.

*Come to think of it, he was telling me about the time he became Tokifuyu's servant until I fell asleep last night. Maybe that's why I had that dream.*

Masamichi looked at Shino's profile as the specter remained motionless, his eyes closed.

To Masamichi's eyes, now completely accustomed to the darkness, the line from Shino's forehead to the high bridge of his nose looked as beautiful and divine as a marble statue. It was hard to believe that he was a vessel created by an expert human being.

*Shino looks so calm and collected now, but he was fussing like a spoiled child attending elementary school.*

Unfortunately, Masamichi had that dream through Shino's eyes, so he couldn't know what the specter looked like then. Nevertheless, from the way he spoke and the movements of his vision, it was clear that Shino was pretty active—or rather, completely restless.

*That was my dream, but I wonder if Shino was really like that a thousand years ago.*

Masamichi observed Shino's beautiful profile next to him and grinned. He recalled his dream, and although he knew Shino's appearance shouldn't have changed, he thought of how cute the specter must have been a thousand years

ago.

The next thing he knew, Shino suddenly spoke, his eyes still closed.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Whoa!”

Startled, Masamichi pressed a hand against his heart.

However low it may have sounded, Shino’s voice had a sharpness that lashed at one’s nerves.

“Were you up? Wow, I never even raised my voice. How could you tell I was smiling when your eyes were closed?”

“I told you. Specters don’t need to sleep. I was only resting with my eyes closed to let the *energy* I took from you become a part of me. Besides, I don’t need to see your every move. I can tell by the air around you. I’m your master, for crying out loud.”

“Ngh. Is it that obvious? So you also knew that I was dreaming?”

“You were dreaming?”

Shino seemed a little intrigued and turned his head toward Masamichi.

“Ha-ha-ha. So you didn’t know that, huh? I’ll tell you about it...”

Masamichi told Shino about his dream.

Unaware that Shino was scowling as he listened without a word, he focused on being accurate and ended his story with a laugh.

“I never thought I had such a great imagination. You told me about when you met Tokifuyu right before I fell asleep, but I didn’t expect to dream of being you and fabricating an image of him.”

Masamichi finally noticed the sour look on Shino’s face and thought, *Uh-oh*.

“Sorry. I’m not good at telling a story in a nutshell. My description of my dream was long and boring. I got carried away...”

Shino cut off Masamichi’s apology with a brief but clear “no.” With a grim look, he said, “I was caught off guard. I didn’t think you would perceive it.”

“Huh?!”

Masamichi was stunned, and Shino said sullenly, “You weren’t dreaming. That was my memory you were watching.”

“Your memory?”

“I told you a silly old story, and I was bored after you fell asleep and had some recollections of the past. One of them seems to have drifted into the abundant empty spaces in your head.”

Surprised, Masamichi raised his head.

“Can something like that happen?”

Shino’s brows were still knitted as he nodded.

“It must be possible since it happened. Probably because our bodies were in contact, and your *energy* was filling me.”

“...I don’t know how it works, but is it because our *energy* became similar, and your memories entered my mind?”

“That’s the only reasonable explanation.”

Shino didn’t look happy that he had inadvertently shared his private memories with his servant. The wrinkles between his eyebrows were so deep that a piece of paper could have been caught between them. In stark contrast, a gentle smile spread across Masamichi’s face.

“I see. So that’s what Tokifuyu was like. He seemed very nice, warm, and generous. He didn’t look like the kind of person who would lock you in a jar and bury you in the ground.”

Shino’s beautiful face contorted in displeasure, and he said nothing for a while. Eventually, he spoke in a soft voice and made Masamichi gasp.

“That’s why I was caught off guard.”

“Shino...”

“I was naive to think the man had feelings. The result of that was a thousand years of imprisonment. Probably longer if the jar hadn’t been broken.”

Shino dexterously rolled over under the small comforter and turned his back

to Masamichi.

Panicked, Masamichi apologized.

“I’m sorry! I’m really sorry. I was insensitive. I just...”

“Shut up.”

Shino snapped without allowing Masamichi to find the right words to explain, and Masamichi cringed.

“Go to sleep. Or get out.”

Masamichi half reflexively responded, “I’ll sleep!”

Shino became silent after that.

Masamichi stiffened and also kept his mouth shut.

There was now an oppressive silence in the room, no longer as tranquil as it had been before Masamichi entered. It was easy to say he would sleep but doing that was another story. The atmosphere was tense, and all Masamichi could do was watch Shino’s unmoving back and stay still.

Then suddenly, he heard Shino say, “There’s just one thing. He had a keen insight.”

“Huh?!”

“That mainstay garments for later generations would be easier to wear—more casual. That’s what Tokifuyu said.”

“Oh, you’re right,” Masamichi agreed, recalling Tokifuyu’s words. “For people of the Heian period, our clothes today are like underwear. I wonder if Tokifuyu would be surprised if he saw it or if he’d envy us.”

Masamichi was worried that he might have offended Shino again, but Shino turned over a second time, this time toward Masamichi, and lay on his back. The anger had disappeared from his profile.

“Tokifuyu would have been delighted,” he said. “He would have worn sloppy sweatshirts and sweatpants year-round. I don’t even need to think about it.”

Masamichi recalled the man’s laid-back smile in his dream and grinned.



“I think I can imagine that, too. Hey, Shino?”

“What?”

“Maybe you didn’t mean to do it, but thanks for sharing your precious memories. I think I understand you a little better now.”

Shino didn’t immediately respond, seeming more than a little taken aback by Masamichi’s sudden words of gratitude. What eventually escaped his thin lips were blunt words.

“That was just a recollection. It wasn’t a precious memory. So don’t discharge too much of your *energy*. If you’re thinking of riling me up, I’ll devour you until you won’t be able to get up.”

“...Ah.”

Hearing that, Masamichi realized his entire body was once again glowing gold.

He moved his right hand in front of his face and said with amazement, “I guess it just comes out when I’m happy. I don’t mean to push your buttons, but I don’t know how to control it. Besides, I don’t want to be forced to stop being happy.”

Shino clicked his tongue at his servant’s modest protest.

“You must learn to regulate your *energy* on your own. That’s the only way. I will let you choose tonight if you wish to return to your room or give up and continue feeding me your *energy* until morning.”

This time, it was Masamichi’s turn to silently consider the options that Shino made to sound like a grand gesture.

After a short silence, he yawned and said, “I’ll stay here. To apologize for saying things that made you mad since all I can do is give you a little extra *energy*. Even then, all I do is lay on my back, and I feel kind of bad about that.”

His choice must have been somewhat surprising to Shino.

“You’re such a sucker.”

Despite saying that, Shino had no reason to refuse Masamichi’s *energy*, which was exquisite to him. He just closed his eyes as if telling Masamichi to do

whatever he wanted.

Masamichi, on the other hand, lay in the darkness with his eyes open, his face resting on his pillow, and his entire body turned toward the specter.

*Oh, it's flowing.*

The *energy* emitted from Masamichi's body radiated faintly. It slowly traveled over the mattress without a sound and enveloped Shino's body.

It was true that Masamichi felt his hands and feet become cold when he lost even a small amount of *energy*, but it wasn't particularly unpleasant.

The *energy* wavering before him seemed to flow naturally toward Shino, and the specter didn't appear to be devouring it as he said.

*I must have been really happy to glimpse Shino and Tokifuyu's memories. I didn't get to see what Shino looked like, but just hearing him throwing a tantrum like a child was a lot of fun. Could that mean...?*

The slight weight he felt in his hands and feet gradually spread to his torso as if another cool, heavy blanket had been placed over him.

The sensation calmed Masamichi's mind and brought back his forgotten sleepiness.

*I must seriously be interested in Shino. Is that all it is?*

He was inclined to think it through, but sleep rapidly deprived him of that desire.

"Good night," Masamichi said in a low voice, knowing Shino would not say good night back to him. Then he surrendered himself to a pleasant weariness and closed his eyes.



A while later, Masamichi received his first *baptism of the rainy season*.

The sky seemed grim around this time of year, and rain fell steadily day and night, bringing plenty of the dark atmosphere that came with the season. The humidity in the old wooden structure of Bougyoudou spiked so quickly it was

almost amusing.

Twenty-four-hour ventilation wasn't needed. Unlike modern, airtight houses, drafts from outside blew through the house.

The eco-friendly situation may have been pleasing, but it was a different story during the rainy season.

The humidity from outside was relentless, and the upstairs hallway had two small leaks through which rain dripped into the house.

"It happens every year," Shino said. "Why, Tokifuyu's residence was worse. The rain leaked so hard everywhere that the servants couldn't keep up, catching the drops with buckets. Eventually, Tokifuyu grew so amused that he would play his flute to the sound of the water dripping from the ceiling into the buckets."

There wasn't a hint of amusement in his face as he spoke and brought a large tin bucket out of nowhere and set it on the wet floor.

It appeared that he had no intention of fixing the leaks.

Specters didn't seem bothered by humidity in the first place.

But Masamichi, a human, was.

He couldn't bear to see everything in the house get moldy, and he was concerned about the piles of items in the store.

Since he angered an artifact spirit and almost got killed when he tried to clean the place without Shino's permission, Masamichi had never forgotten that the piles of silent items were all artifact spirits, alive with their own consciousness.

Therefore, he was concerned about the potential damage the tremendous humidity might do to wooden or metal items and if they might be uncomfortable.

Shino said indifferently, "They, too, are spirits, however weak they may be. Something like humidity wouldn't bother them. If they decay, it only means their luck has run out."

But Masamichi was adamant. He said the humidity was also uncomfortable for customers, and he bulldozed his way through the entire house, cleaning all

the air conditioners.

He opened the covers of the air conditioners that had been unused since the previous owner and his wife died, removed the mold and dust to the extent possible for an amateur, and fixed them up to marginally working condition.

As a result of his efforts, he turned them on, and the humidity disappeared from the living and store areas.

As for the leaking roofs, Masamichi talked to his father, a DIY hobbyist, and learned that the entire house would be damaged if left unattended. He convinced Shino to have a repair service handle the issue.

One day after dinner, Masamichi unfolded a booklet of the neighborhood association's bylaws, pointed to an ad, and said, "It's better to call a service the association recommends, right? They're in the neighborhood. Can I call them tomorrow? For starters, we need to have them come take a look."

Sipping the Kyo-bancha that Masamichi had brewed and spreading his newspaper in front of him after pushing his dishes into a corner, Shino said curtly, "Suit yourself."

"I think we should have them look at the entire roof. Having them fix any other areas that might leak simultaneously will probably be cheaper."

"I said, suit yourself."

As timid as he was, even Masamichi was irritated by Shino's lack of interest in home repairs.

"But this is your house."

Shino's gaze remained fixed on his newspaper as he said brusquely, "I don't need you to tell me that. I'm the landlord, telling you to do as you please. Do what you want. You don't have to report everything to me every time."

"That's not the issue here."

Although Masamichi was afraid of lighting Shino's short fuse, he didn't want to back down since countless similar incidents would likely occur in the future.

Thinking that, Masamichi worked up his courage and objected.

“What?”

And Shino’s voice quickly became sharper.

Instead of backing down and saying, “Nothing,” Masamichi clenched his fists under the table to encourage himself and continued, “I know I’m your servant, but it isn’t as if I understand everything you feel. If I do things without telling you, I might do something you don’t expect or like. I think things like that could happen.”

“So what? I’ve permitted you to do as you please; any mistakes you make will be my responsibility. I know that much.”

“That isn’t the point!”

Shino’s eyes finally left his paper and penetrated Masamichi’s. They were so sharp that Masamichi, who should have been used to it, felt a small tremor in his body.

Rooting himself on as his voice trembled, Masamichi did his best to put together the right words.

“This is a house that Daizo and Yoriko left you, and it’s full of memories of them, right? Don’t you want to fix it properly so you can preserve the atmosphere for a long time?”

Shino looked at Masamichi suspiciously and retorted, “Any structure will eventually decay regardless of what one does.”

“Aaahh.” Masamichi held his head. “Oh, I get it. That’s how you think when you’ve been watching the human world for over a thousand years, huh? Then you don’t mind if this house goes to ruin?”

“Anything that has form will eventually perish. That’s all there is to it. Houses become ruined. Objects break. Living things die. That includes you, too, Masamichi.”

“...R-right.”

“I will also someday perish, but as Tokifuyu once said, specters live much longer than humans. We basically don’t have a life expectancy.”

Shino’s words intrigued Masamichi, who leaned forward.

“You don’t? So no average or maximum life span you could use as an example?”

“No,” he said.

“Then...specters just keep growing in population?”

“Of course not. Even specters perish. For example, take the artifact spirits here. The life spans of the vessels they’re contained in are their life spans. In human terms, you can’t live if you lose your *body*.”

“I see,” Masamichi said and asked fearfully, “Then what about a specter like you?”

“Basically, we increase our magical power by eating one another. By taking another life, we grow and maintain our lives, as you humans would put it. Eating other living things or their *energy* will also boost our magical power but not as much as cannibalism.”

“So my *energy* is like a snack for you?”

“But it gives me more power than the food that humans eat.”

“Is that how it is...?”

Glancing amusedly at Masamichi’s disappointment, Shino said, “If I were sealed in a place where I couldn’t eat, as Tokifuyu had done, I would eventually run out of my magical power and perish. It’s more annihilation than death.”

“I see. So you were in a state like that for a thousand years, huh? That’s amazing. I can’t even imagine fasting for a thousand years.”

“It means I had that much magical power to survive—even after Tokifuyu took most of it away. I still haven’t regained the power I had before. You can’t even start to imagine how powerful I was then.”

Masamichi wasn’t sure how to react to Shino, who was puffing out his chest in pride, and resorted to nodding noncommittally.

Shino continued talking. Perhaps Shino wasn’t looking for compliments from his servant.

“Even I would be eaten and become a part of a powerful foe’s *energy* if I

come across a specter stronger than me. That could be called my death. Specters are destined to that type of fate. But rest assured that I have no intention of dying before you do.”

“Th-thanks, I guess. I think we’ve gotten sidetracked.”

Masamichi’s modest indignation had faltered with information he hadn’t expected to receive.

“I get it that you’re fine if this house is ruined. But I’ve liked the atmosphere since I first came here. It’s old and inconvenient in some ways, but it makes me feel at home.”

Shino turned to the next page of the newspaper he was reading with a look that said he couldn’t care less, not that Masamichi was fazed in the least bit.

“I never met Daizo and Yoriko, but I like feeling their presence in this house. I can imagine them eating rice freshly made in that gas rice cooker and the different kinds of flowers they arranged in that lovely green vase. I want this house to be safe and sound for as long as possible. I want to fix the leaks and do other things to extend its life.”

“Yeah, and I told you to do what you wanted.”

“You aren’t listening! At least tell me if you don’t mind that I feel this way. We live here together, and I can’t bear to do anything that doesn’t make you happy. Are you for or against doing repairs? Don’t tell me you don’t care. At least tell me how you’re inclined to feel.”

Again, Shino shifted his gaze from the paper to Masamichi’s face, his well-shaped eyebrows slightly furrowed.

“You are such an idiot.”

“...Pardon me?”

“I know you have a particular fondness for this house. I also know that you have feelings for Daizo and Yoriko, not to mention always working like a busy bee to protect the house, the goods, and yourself.”

“Oh.”

Masamichi widened his round eyes.

He never thought Shino would take note of the efforts he'd been making.

He thought Shino only considered him a picky pest that busied itself doing this, that, and the other thing on his own initiative.

*He said he knows I work to protect the house, the goods, and myself. He knows why I do the things that I do.*

Masamichi's heart warmed as a certain suspicion also arose in his mind.

"Hey, Shino?"

"What?"

"When you tell me to do as I please or say you don't care, are you thinking it's too much hassle? Like if you leave things to me, I'll get on them if you let me do what I want?"

"Shut up. You're my servant. Don't try to read your master's mind."

Shino rustled his newspaper. Masamichi could still see the lower part of his face, which looked nonchalant, but he had hidden himself from Masamichi's view.

"Have you been thinking...at least a little...that it might be better to fix up the house? Were you just being too lazy to do it?"

"Shut up."

"Oh, come on."

Wisely swallowing a remark that Shino wasn't being honest, the air went out of Masamichi, and he lay his head on the table.

"I was worried you might be annoyed, having me do stuff around here. You're the one who pays for everything, after all."

"That's natural. I'm your master."

"I knew you'd say that, but still. I'm the one who's allergic to house dust, concerned about the humidity, and worried about the leaking roof. But if you're agreeable, I'm glad I'm doing—or trying—to work on these things."

Shino looked amused as Masamichi pressed his rounded cheek against the smooth tabletop and mumbled.



“Does it take that much energy to do that?”

“Yes, it does. At least, for me it does. I’m glad I told you about it. But from now on, I want you to tell me when you find something troublesome. I’m your servant, and I’ll hustle at most everything.”

“That’s true. All right, but I still don’t understand humans. Tokifuyu was a tough boss when it came to using me, a specter. I suppose it’s all right to use you to the same extent.”

“Huh?!”

“I thought I should go easy on you because, unlike me, you are a fragile human, but I guess that isn’t necessary. Do your best, Masamichi.”

“Huh...? U-um, okay. To the extent possible.”

Since that was an order his boss gave, Masamichi lifted his head from the table and straightened his back when someone noisily turned the store’s doorknob.

Now, Bougyoudou closed shop between five and six in the evening unless customers were scheduled to arrive late. The door was firmly locked, so it wouldn’t open, no matter how hard someone kept turning the knob.

Perhaps realizing that, the visitor began knocking.

It wasn’t just knocking. It was with tremendous force, like the person was punching the door as hard as they could with their fist.

The thick wooden door didn’t budge from the impact, but the long Nambu iron tongs hung to announce visitors clashed and released a high-pitched sound.

“H-huh?!?! Who could it be at this hour?”

Tensing with surprise, Masamichi rose and glanced at the wall clock.

It was already past eight PM. What kind of customer would come to an antique shop with such an attitude at this hour?

Masamichi called out, “Shino!” But the specter wasn’t surprised or harried, only narrowing his eyes a little. “Shino, someone’s at the door!”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. My hearing is a hundred times better than yours. Hence, the annoyance is that much greater.”

Despite Masamichi’s panic, Shino calmly folded his paper and stood up.

The banging on the door was getting more and more intense. Whoever it was, they appeared desperate.

“You stay there,” Shino said as he jumped down to the earthen floor, put on his sandals, and headed for the store entrance.

Masamichi quickly turned on the light switch near the stairs that lit the store.

The single incandescent lamp hanging over the store’s center didn’t illuminate the place well. Masamichi knew the darkness was irrelevant to Shino’s vision but figured some light would be better than nothing.

The thumping on the door became louder and more restless. The sounds sometimes overlapped, probably because the person was pounding with both fists.

*Who could it be? What’s the hurry?*

Without looking back at Masamichi, who stood at the stairs and watched him, Shino stood before the door, unlocked it without hesitation, and pulled the knob with all his might.

“Eep!”

Yumiko Matsuoka came tumbling in with a shriek. The tall, slim writer lost her balance as she had been about to pound on the door with full force and fell with a mighty thud.

Instead of trying to catch her, Shino quickly retreated a half step.

She hit her shoulder, knee, and possibly her chin against the hard brick floor and screamed.

“Oww!!” Rolling on the floor, she pleaded desperately, “P-please close the door! Hurry!”

Shino crossed over her without mercy, quickly peeked outside, and closed the door as requested. Then he turned and called out to Masamichi, “Turn out the

store light. You can leave the light on in the tea room.”

At times like this, Shino’s tone didn’t leave room for questions.

“Yes, sir!”

Masamichi did as he was told but forgot the first part of the order and started moving to join Shino and Matsuoka.

“Miss Matsuoka, are you okay?!”

Then Shino yelled angrily, “Stay where you are!”

“Whoa. O-okay, but...”

“I’ll take her over there.”

Shino bent down and lifted Matsuoka, still moaning and unable to move, and carried her into the tea room.

“Oh, uh, first things first!”

Masamichi hurriedly moved the table to the back of the room and laid three cushions side by side in the vacated space.

Immediately understanding Masamichi’s intention, Shino gently laid Matsuoka on one of them for him.

“I-I’m sorry,” Matsuoka managed between heavy breathing, her chest and shoulders rising and falling like a bellows.

She was always vibrant when she came to the store, but on this evening, she looked terrible.

As was the case when Masamichi first arrived at the house—no, more than that—she was soaked from the pouring rain. She had grit all over, as if she had fallen several times.

On close inspection, the knees of her pants were torn, and she had an abrasion on her cheek. The cuts were covered with many grains of sand, but they didn’t seem to have anything to do with her falls.

Masamichi also noticed that she was wearing only one of her high-heeled shoes.

“Wait here a second,” Masamichi said. He dashed to the back, brought a few large towels from the dressing room, and placed them by her cushion. Then he ran into the kitchen, filled a large glass with tap water, and brought it to the tea room.

“Stay still for as long as you like. Use the towels and drink some water when you can move.”

“...Thanks,” she said, apparently unable to find the strength to move right away. She pressed her cheek against the cushion and looked toward the door.

“No one’s...coming, right?”

Shino was the one to answer her as he sat cross-legged beside her.

“Rest assured, no one is approaching this store so far.”

Matsuoka looked at him curiously.

“How do you know that?”

“This is my territory. I know everything,” he replied as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Matsuoka quirked a corner of her mouth a few millimeters questioningly.

But her effort to smile didn’t last, and her face contorted. Her eyes welled up, and tears fell on her cushion.

“I was scared,” she said in a trembling voice.

*This headstrong woman is saying she was scared. What on earth could have happened?*

Masamichi looked at Shino, who crossed his arms and said without raising an eyebrow, “It appears you were. Even I never expected you to lose your composure and come running here of all places, frightened and shedding tears without worrying about appearances. What kind of sideshow is this?”

“Hey, Shino, can’t you be a little less direct?! Don’t kick someone who’s already down,” Masamichi said, hoping the specter would go easier on the woman.

But perhaps Shino’s supercilious attitude ignited her rebellious spirit, or

maybe it helped calm her down... Hiccuping, Matsuoka wiped her tears with her filthy hands.

He quickly offered her a towel.

“Here! Please use this. I can also bring you a wet towel if you want.”

“...Thanks. This is all I need.”

With bright red, bloodshot eyes and a trembling voice, Matsuoka expressed her gratitude and managed to raise herself on the cushion while supporting herself with both hands. She then began wiping her face and hair with the towel he gave her.

“I’m genuinely sorry to have caused you trouble. But when I thought about running, this was the only place I could think of going.”

Masamichi’s heart was pounding from worry that Shino might tell her she was a nuisance, but he was wrong. He happily said, “That was a wise decision.”

“Huh?!”

“Shino?”

Both Matsuoka and Masamichi stared at Shino’s face in bewilderment. Shino was silent momentarily as he looked toward the door, then suddenly asked Matsuoka, “Were three men chasing you?”

Looking stunned, Matsuoka replied, “Yes. They didn’t look like average citizens.”

“Hmm. They must be the ones who just passed by the store. They probably never imagined that you would come running into an antique shop. People with low cognition can’t consider a wide range of possibilities,” he said casually.

Matsuoka looked a little horrified as she stared at his face.

“How do you know that?”

“Are you in a position to pry?”

Matsuoka was at a loss for words at Shino’s quick response.

“You’re right,” Matsuoka said as she sat flat on her cushion. She drank the water Masamichi had brought her and finally managed to say, “Uh...thank you

again for helping me. You really...really saved my life.”

Masamichi brought her another glass. He placed it in front of her and asked hesitantly, “What happened? Why were people coming after you?”

“Oh...um. It pains me to say this after all your help, but I might get you involved if I tell you.”

She sounded apologetic, but Shino interrupted with a snort as if making fun of her.

“It’s probably related to the case you said you were chasing the last time you were here.”

He was right on the mark. Matsuoka shuddered.

Not seeming particularly interested, Shino said, “Never mind. Just tell us. We’re already caught up in your mess. Even if you can get away with it now, tangled threads don’t easily get untangled. I can’t deal with the situation if I don’t know what’s what. That’s what you call a real nuisance.”

“Shino...” Masamichi was relieved.

Shino may sound harsh, but he must have felt for her. That’s why he was trying to offer a helping hand.

*Maybe it’s because he gave her a lucky item the other day. If something happened to her, the artifact spirit who had finally met its new master would end up unhappy.*

As if to corroborate Masamichi’s thoughts, Shino asked Matsuoka, “Do you have that fan with you?”

Matsuoka looked puzzled for a moment but quickly nodded and reached into the inside pocket of her jacket. And she pulled out that small fan.

“Of course. Maybe it protected me tonight and led me here, though you might think I’m being ridiculous.”

“There couldn’t be any other reason.”

“Huh?!”

“Never mind. Just explain your situation to me. I’m sure you didn’t come here

on a courtesy visit. You may try to act tough, but you need help. Depending on the situation, and because of that fan, I may be willing to help you to the extent of clearing away the sparks of fire falling on you.”

Shino then ordered Masamichi to brew another cup of tea. It meant he would listen to Matsuoka’s story while they sipped that tea.

“Right away. Miss Matsuoka, I’ll make you a cup, too. It’s hot and humid, but you’re cold from the rain.”

Masamichi then went to the kitchen.

However, he could see and hear them well since only a low cupboard separated the kitchen from the tea room.

He filled a small but heavy iron kettle with water, put it on the stove, and listened closely to what Matsuoka had to say.

“I told you I often walk around town talking to people to keep up with local trends. The young kids who spend time at shops, cafés, and burger shops after school are good sources of information about what’s trendy. And, well, a funny urban legend began spreading among them in spring...around April.”

“An urban legend? You mean those stories you sometimes see on television with the usual, ‘Do you or don’t you believe? The choice is yours...’”

“Yes, that kind of thing. But more...like those scary ghost stories that entertainer Junji Inagawa tells in the summer.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know it. Anyway, what’s this about?”

“It’s...really silly, but no matter who I talk to, it’s basically similar, without variations. That’s why I wondered if it was true and began following it up. Okay, to summarize, you might say it’s *a hit-and-run case with a missing corpse.*”

*Thud!*

Masamichi made a loud noise.

The teacup he had just taken out of the cupboard for Matsuoka tumbled helplessly onto the stovetop. Fortunately, it didn’t break.

“M-Miss Matsuoka, what did you just say?”

“Oh, sorry. Couldn’t you hear me? I said it was a hit-and-run case with a missing corpse.”

The blood drained from Masamichi’s face.

“A rumor started spreading in April...about a *hit-and-run incident with the victim’s body missing*? Shino, could that possibly be...?”

The corners of Shino’s mouth lifted as Masamichi stared at him, his own expression tense.

“I told you. A tangled web is not easily untangled. Masamichi, we can finally tug on the thread and begin our hunt.”

With mixed feelings of surprise and fear, Masamichi could only stare at Shino in wonder. The specter was smiling ferociously like a predator that had spotted its prey in the distance.



## CHAPTER 5

### Payback

“Junior and senior high school students told me about a rumor spreading at their schools,” Matsuoka said. “They said a friend of someone’s cousin was driving around late at night after a few drinks and ran over a passerby.”

She had regained her composure, sipping the Kyo-bancha Masamichi had made, as she began telling the story about the *urban legend*—or as some called it, the *ghost story*—in her usual crisp tone.

Masamichi’s heart was beating too madly for him to speak, and all he could do was remain seated next to Shino. But Shino was enjoying himself and pointed out, “A friend of someone’s cousin, huh? That’s a stranger.”

Matsuoka agreed. “Right. We don’t know who it is. But the fine piece of string that ties them to the people telling the story makes it sound real. Even with an absurd story that sounds made up, that connection makes it sound like it really happened.”

Matsuoka’s hands holding her teacup continued to tremble. Still, she was probably distracting herself by speaking calmly.

Although her face was still pale, Matsuoka gave her hosts a tiny smile and continued speaking.

“Anyway, the story is the same no matter who tells it. It goes on like this: Sure enough, the impact of the collision was tremendous, and a young male pedestrian was run over. He fell to the side of the road and didn’t move. On closer inspection, one of his legs had been ripped off.”

“...!”

Masamichi shook violently. He didn’t realize his fingers were tightening their grip on the thighs of his trousers.

“The man driving the car panicked and ran from the scene, saying this was a major catastrophe and he probably killed the person. His friends told him it wasn’t a person and convinced him it was a mannequin doll, gently making him clam up. But he got scared when he began sobering up and returned to check out the scene. It was probably about an hour after the accident. Then...”

Masamichi swallowed hard.

“Um...then what? What happened?”

Masamichi’s voice was pitifully hoarse, but Matsuoka must have figured it was because he was extremely scared. She giggled and tilted her head.

“Masamichi, are you the type we often see who loves ghost stories even though you’re afraid of ghosts?”

“N-no, not particularly...though I do scare easily.”

“It’s okay. Everyone likes a good ghost story. Besides, this story isn’t all that scary. It’s just that when the man who caused the accident returned to the scene, he didn’t even see a shadow of the person who had fallen.”

“M-maybe someone called an ambulance,” Masamichi desperately pointed out, but Matsuoka shook her head.

“The man thought that, too, but not a single police officer was at the scene. Even in the middle of the night, the police would at least do an inspection. And when he carefully walked around, he found a few small pools of blood that were still fresh, and he got scared and ran away again. Since then, as the time of the accident approaches, he’s said to smell blood wafting out of nowhere and hear the sound of footsteps approaching—a shoe kicking the ground with a single leg, going *thump, thump, thump*...since the victim lost a leg.”

Masamichi heard a hissing sound in his throat.

*There’s no doubt about it. She’s talking about me. No matter how you look at it, this urban legend is about the hit-and-run accident I was in, with a few things added to make it more dramatic...because Shino fixed my leg, and I don’t know who the driver was, so I couldn’t go haunt him or anything. Oh, that reminds me...*

Thoughts he couldn't voice swirled violently in Masamichi's head.

But when he noticed something and looked at Shino, sitting next to him, the specter said to Matsuoka with an ominous smile, "That's nonsense. Are you telling me you sensed a shred of truth to this story?"

Matsuoka nodded. Her face was serious again.

"The last part sounds like a ghost story, but it's very simple up to that point, don't you think? And no matter who I talk to, everyone gives me the same location. Akatsuki's third district..."

"...!"

Dismayed, Masamichi poked Shino in the shin under the table so Matsuoka wouldn't see it.

The address was precisely where Masamichi was hit by a car.

Shino looked at him as if to say, "I know," but it was Matsuoka he turned to.

"So curiosity got the better of you, and you went to look."

Matsuoka nodded.

"I went to see the site. As I'd expected, there were no more puddles of blood around, but I talked to passersby and found several people who said they'd seen something like blood on the asphalt around the beginning of March. So I asked around in the neighborhood."

"Were there any witnesses?" Shino asked teasingly, but his eyes weren't smiling at all. He appeared to be enjoying listening to the telling of an urban legend, but what he was really doing was gathering information.

Without realizing that, Matsuoka regretfully shook her head.

"No," she said. "Not at that hour. It's a quiet residential area. No one walks around that late. Some people said they heard the impact, but they were in their nightclothes and didn't want to go out and get involved. They all said they heard nothing more and went back to sleep."

"...Phew."

Masamichi patted his chest in relief. Matsuoka, however, continued with a

straight face.

“But the sound of the impact that everyone heard bothers me. As long as some said they saw blood, I think a hit-and-run accident must have occurred. But the police had no record of it when I asked, and the hospitals in the area said they didn’t have anyone come in with a torn leg. That made me suspect another possibility.”

“Another...possibility?”

Too anxious to sit still, Masamichi asked his question in a reserved manner while shifting his body around.

*Don’t tell me she suspects that the victim agreed to become a specter’s servant and had him sew his body back together and save his life...?*

Matsuoka put her teacup on the small tray Masamichi had placed on the tatami mat and raised her index finger. “It’s a cover-up.”

“What?!”

“What if the man who ran over the victim had been with his friends? Maybe it’s as the urban legend goes—that he ran away and then returned, but he took the victim and escaped before anyone could find out about the accident?”

“...Oh.”

Whether from relief or bewilderment, Masamichi sighed.

“Maybe the victim was already dead. He lost a leg. He would have bled to death. It isn’t a wound that heals on its own, and there would have been nothing a shady doctor could have done for him. So I figured he had either died or been left to die.”

“Ngh.” Masamichi groaned bitterly.

Matsuoka wasn’t completely off the mark, but she was far from correct.

But he couldn’t exactly point that out; all he could do was groan.

“Are you okay? Stop me if I’m scaring you too much,” Matsuoka said, oblivious to the truth and worrying about Masamichi. But she sensed Shino’s gaze urging her to go on and confessed about her actions.

“This is a pretty big story if I could uncover the truth and identify the perp and the victim. Besides, the victim could have been buried or sunk somewhere,” she said, then looked far into the distance.

“I don’t know who killed my father, either, but we were able to see and mourn him. But not this victim. Maybe they’ve been treated much worse. And maybe they have family unaware of what happened, still waiting for him to come home. Considering that, I couldn’t help looking into this case.”

Shino reached for his teacup and took a sip of the Kyo-bancha Masamichi had made before opening his mouth to speak.

“So what did you do?”

“I searched for missing persons who had been reported to the local police since March and interviewed more people. But I didn’t learn anything about the victim or about the perp’s identity or whereabouts.”

*Well, of course not. I don’t know about the perp, but the victim, the guy who was run over, is right here, as good as new, and my family doesn’t even know I was in an accident.*

As his initial shock gradually subsided, Masamichi started feeling sympathetic toward Matsuoka.

As the saying goes, “Fact is stranger than fiction.” The things happening to Masamichi were much more horrifying than the urban legend teenagers were sharing with their friends.

*I wish I could tell her the truth, but that’s impossible. And anyway, she’d never believe me.*

Unaware of the complicated thoughts that ran through Masamichi’s mind, Matsuoka brightened and said confidently, “I was at a dead end; then it came to me. If I’m having trouble finding the victim, I can look for the car that hit him.”

“Oh, I see! You started looking for the car that hit m— ...I mean, the victim.”

That was close. He almost said, “hit *me*,” and corrected himself. Unconcerned, Matsuoka nodded.

“The car hit the victim so hard it severed his leg. The car couldn’t have gone

unscathed with that much force. You couldn't fix something like that yourself. Of course, you could wash the blood off, but you would want to clean up the damage to cover up the accident. Now, a dealership would be suspicious if someone brought in a car like that. They must have taken the car directly to a sheet metal shop is what I figured."

"So you checked out all the sheet metal shops in the area...?"

"But it was right under my nose. I imagined that the perp must have thought to take it to a shop as far away as possible. In the end, it was a small sheet metal plant near Akatsuki that I obtained information that sounded fairly plausible."

"Hiding in plain sight works better than one might think," Shino said, chuckling boldly.

That applied precisely to him, and Masamichi was appalled.

"Is that how things go? I think I need to do more reading in criminal psychology. Anyway, I spoke with a young man at the sheet metal shop, who told me that around the beginning of March, someone brought in a sports car with the front end dented, and it was really tough to repair. He said he asked the driver what he hit, and he said he hit a boar."

"Huh. So he came up with a pretty plausible excuse."

"Right. But the repairman said the damage looked slightly different from what he'd expect if the car had hit a boar. I was persistent, and the man told me the driver was the third son of the president of a major construction company. I looked him up online and learned that he'd had several misdemeanors since his school days...and probably other crimes his parents covered up with their money," Matsuoka explained in a low voice. Even Masamichi, unfamiliar with the industry, had heard the name of the construction company she mentioned in television commercials. Shino shrugged like he didn't care.

"And? Isn't that all the information you need to write your story?"

"No way! Although several people may go with just that, I don't want to write a story without corroboration. I asked the repairman to call me if he remembered anything else. And he contacted me the other day."

“What did he say...?”

Masamichi watched Matsuoka’s face with concern as her excitement began building again.

She laced her fingers, squeezed them hard, and took a deep breath before speaking.

“The brother of the repairman talked to the owner of the shop that did the car repair, who said it was a major incident and he wanted to help, but he couldn’t come right out and sell information on the son of a valued regular customer. Still, he took photos of the car damage before doing the repair work and was willing to offer that to me. He told me to come to his shop after it closed for business...”

Shino’s beautiful face became a frown as if to say he was genuinely dumbfounded.

“Talk about being foolish. So you went there by yourself after it closed for business?”

“He told me to come quietly! But...yes, I did. You’re right; I should have been more careful. Maybe I got carried away thinking I was getting closer to the truth. When I went to the shop, the spoiled son of the construction company was there with two friends, flashing the business card I gave the repairman, laughing in a disgusting way.”

Matsuoka gripped her laced fingers so hard that the joints turned white.

“It was too late when I realized I’d been tricked and was trapped. I tried to run away, but they grabbed my arms and twisted them backward, and I couldn’t move. They were good at doing that. They weren’t amateurs. They’ve definitely roughed people up before,” Matsuoka said as if muttering to herself, then looked sharply at Shino.

“The son said he couldn’t let me get away if I’d gotten this close to the truth... and threatened me. He said he’d let me choose if I wanted to be sold overseas or stuffed in an old drum and thrown into the sea. I was so scared...horrified.”

“How did you get away?” Masamichi asked quietly.

Matsuoka forced herself to calm her raspy breathing and answered in a low voice, "It's...very strange."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The three men surrounded me and tried to take me away from the factory... in a minivan with tinted windows. I was in a desperate situation. Once I got in, the only possibility was to be killed."

"...Uh-huh."

"But at that moment, the man who tried to push me into the car yelped, '*Ouch!*' He let go of me and pressed his hands against his eyes. Then I saw that this fan had somehow fallen at his feet."

Matsuoka pulled out the fan in her pocket and gently rubbed the bones.

"It's funny. How did a fan I had tucked away in my pocket like this fly out and hit the man in the face? But anyway, I knew it was my only chance. I picked up the fan and clutched it in my hand, managed to push the other two men, who were preoccupied with the one in pain, and ran away into the darkness. I knew they'd soon catch up, but I had to try."

"Right. A-and?"

In contrast to Masamichi, who was leaning forward, Shino still looked sour with his arms folded.

"I ran and ran, one of my shoes came off, and the men came yelling after me. When I thought I was at the end of the line, I saw a cab approaching me. That was the second piece of luck I had. I flagged it and jumped in."

"G-good!"

"But the minivan came right behind my cab. The driver asked me where I wanted to go, and I remembered they had my business card. It only has my name, e-mail address, and phone number, but it's easy to figure out my address from there. I knew it was dangerous to return to my apartment, so..."

"So you came here?"

Matsuoka nodded awkwardly.



“This was the only place that came to mind. I have friends, but I couldn’t get them involved.”

“Did you think it was okay to get us involved?” Shino asked as if mocking her. Matsuoka’s shoulders sagged.

“I know, and I’m sorry. But...for some reason, the fan I held seemed to get hot when I thought of this store. I thought it was telling me it was okay to come here, and I asked the driver to lose the minivan while heading here.”

“It sounds like a police drama.”

Matsuoka forced a crooked smile on her face and nodded. “Yes.”

“The driver did his best to lose that minivan; then I had him drop me off nearby, and I came running as fast as possible.”

Shino sighed deeply and shook his head.

“You may think you did well, but your foes saw the license plate of your taxi. The driver isn’t a loyal friend. He would easily admit where he dropped you off if scary-looking men accost him.”

“...But...”

“That’s why they passed by this store. Men like them are as persistent as snakes. Sooner or later, they’re sure to come back to the area. They’ll go door-to-door, looking for you.”

“I...I’m really sorry. I never... I know I don’t have the right to say this, but I didn’t mean to drag you into this.”

Matsuoka placed both hands on the tatami mat and bowed low in apology—so low that her forehead was rubbing against the mat.

“P-please don’t do that. It’s all my fault anyway.”

“Masamichi.”

“...Oops.”

Shino sharply reprimanded Masamichi, who was about to say he had inadvertently caused the *urban legend*.

“The fan.”

“...Huh?”

“I gave you that fan. Take good care of it, and it will bring you good luck. You’ve had two streaks of good luck tonight. Or three since you made it here in one piece.”

“...R-right.”

Matsuoka cautiously raised her head and looked curiously at Shino’s frowning face.

“That fact shows that you have cared for the fan as promised. It accepted you as its new master and wished for you to survive. That’s why you are here, alive.”

“...Huh?”

“From this moment on, you are one of my *customers*. As long as you are here, I, as the owner, am obligated to protect you.”

“Mr. Tatsumi?”

Happily, Masamichi explained to Matsuoka, who couldn’t fully comprehend what Shino was saying. “Shino is grateful to you for taking care of that fan. So you can relax now.”

“...But those men...”

“Masamichi and I will do something about them. You stay here and rest.”

“Huh?!”

“But I have a few conditions,” he said as he looked at her and said calmly, “One, treasure that fan the same way that you already have—no, more than that—for the rest of your life. Give it to the person you trust most when you leave this world.”

“Oh...okay. I’ll be sure to do that.”

Matsuoka had no idea why Shino was so worried about the fan when they were in a state of emergency, but she was overwhelmed by the force with which he spoke and promised as asked.

Shino gave a small nod and continued with his next condition.

“Two: Stop chasing this case.”

“I—I can’t do that!”

“This is the type of thing that happens when you meddle in things beyond you. Surely your stupidity and immaturity have sunk in. You aren’t yet qualified to be a crime reporter. If you can’t protect your own life, what can you do for the lives of others? Don’t you think it’s presumptuous?”

Confronted with the bitter truth, Matsuoka bit her lip, unable to say anything back.

“But...they already know who I am,” she managed. “I can’t forget about the case at this point.”

But Shino snapped back.

“The people at the sheet metal shop understood that you would die after they sold you out. They must have received a hefty sum of money and decided to forget you ever existed. Don’t worry about that. As to the three men who came after you...”

“Y-yes?”

“We’ll do something about them,” Shino said simply. Masamichi was startled and looked at his master’s cool face.

*Shino... His master’s order not to attack and eat humans should still be in effect. What’s he planning to do?*

Matsuoka must have wondered the same thing...or worse since she wasn’t aware of Shino’s true identity.

“They aren’t amateurs. They aren’t people you can handle.”

“Shut up.” Shino silenced Matsuoka with his quick response and said, “I’m not finished yet. Three: Stop coming to this store. Don’t show yourself in front of Masamichi or myself. Don’t get involved with us. That is the final condition.”

“...”

On her second visit, Matsuoka had spoken heatedly about how she loved the store. She couldn’t immediately agree to Shino’s conditions and fell silent.

But again, Shino urged her to make a decision.

“You have no choice if you don’t want to die here.”

After being frustrated and silent for a while, Matsuoka eventually nodded.

“You are right. Okay, I promise to accept your conditions.”

“All right. Now give me your fan.”

“...Huh? Oh, uh, okay.”

Taken aback, Matsuoka carefully held out the fan to Shino with both hands.

Taking the fan in his big hand, Shino spread it out and said sternly, “Swear on this fan that you will never break your promise to me.”

“I...swear,” Matsuoka said as she sat up straight and bowed her head.

“All right, we have ourselves a deal.”

As soon as he said that, Shino casually opened the fan and carelessly tossed it toward Matsuoka as he would a paper airplane.

“Oh!!”

Matsuoka tried to grab it with both hands, but it slithered away as if it had a life of its own until finally attaching itself to her cheek.

“Ngh!” she groaned as if suffocating, then fell flat on the tatami mat like a kite where the string had been cut.

“Whoa! Miss Matsuoka!”

Masamichi rushed and picked her up, and the fan fell off her face. He moved his face close to hers until he felt her breath on his cheek and said, “Oh, she’s breathing. Good, she hasn’t died.”

“Of course she hasn’t. Why would I kill a woman I promised to protect?”

“W-well, I mean, uh. Then why has she collapsed?”

Shino stood, then bent down to pick up the fan.

“This fan closed her consciousness. It must genuinely like its new master. It probably wants to let her rest without seeing anything else that might take a few years off her life.”

“Oh, I see. It let her sleep, huh? That’s a considerate fan.”

Relieved, Masamichi laid Matsuoka down on the cushion again. He wanted to remove her still-damp jacket but couldn't touch a woman's body without her permission. He covered her body with a fresh towel and turned to Shino.

"Did you say the fan *didn't want her to see things that might take a few years off her life*? What in the world do you plan to do?"

"I am only disciplining the scoundrels who are trying to harm *my client* as needed," Shino said matter-of-factly, and Masamichi immediately objected.

"But, Shino. Tokifuyu said you weren't supposed to attack humans, right? Isn't that a rule you have to follow?"

Shino quickly retorted, "Tokifuyu said, '*Do not attack and eat humans.*' It will be fine if I don't eat them."

"Maybe that's a loophole, but..."

"That's what a curse is like. My soul will be scattered into the clouds if I resist my master's curse. It's that powerful. But there are many ways around it. The same way I was fine after eating your torn leg."

"Oh yeah. Then...are you thinking of killing them but not eating them?"

"If I kill a human, I will have a corpse on my hands. It's quite burdensome to dispose of a corpse in this day and age. It's too much trouble."

Masamichi nodded with a complex mix of relief, admiration, and dismay.

"Okay, I definitely get the part about it being 'too much trouble.' I'm relieved, though. So what are you going to do?"

Shino grinned and waved the fan in his face.

"Have you forgotten? The scoundrels who are after this woman are the ones who ran over you in their car."

"Oh. Yeah, that's right. I was too worried about Miss Matsuoka to realize that."

"Don't you want to get back at them?"

Masamichi didn't reply right away.

"Why aren't you immediately answering me? Those are people who ran over

you and left you for dead. Isn't it normal to want to kill them?"

Sitting up straight on the tatami mat as Matsuoka had done, Masamichi quietly shook his head.

Shino raised his eyebrows suspiciously. "Well?"

"Because I met you."

"What?"

"Of course, I can't forgive them for what they did. I can't forgive them for trying to kill Miss Matsuoka to silence her, either. But...it's because of the accident that I met you."

"So what?"

"I'm saying I'm glad I met you," Masamichi said quietly, putting his hand against his chest. "Every day is full of surprises, and I've had several scary experiences. I still can't understand many things that happen, but I'm happy to be alive. That's because I'm living here in this house with you. I can't explain it well, but...I'm definitely happier since I met you."

"...So you aren't getting back at them?"

"Nuh-uh," Masamichi said to Shino, who looked disgruntled. "I'd like to do a bit of that, to be honest. I want to make them sorry, so they'll never repeat a crime like this. I really mean it."

"All right. I'll give you a chance at payback. This fan will join you. It, too, wants double payback for its master's suffering."

Masamichi nervously looked from Shino to the fan in his hand.

"What do you mean? What...do you want me to do? There's no way I can fight them directly. I could never win against three men."

"You can with help from me and the fan."

"...Huh?"

"I think I'll use some of Tokifuyu's tricks. I hope I haven't gotten rusty."

"Tricks?"

“He was even lazier than I am. He taught me spiritual medium techniques and had me handle the simpler of his jobs.”

“Wh-whoa... Tokifuyu taught you spiritual medium skills?”

“That’s the type of man he was. Now rise.”

“Huh? Uh, okay.”

Masamichi did as he was told and choked the next moment.

Shino took a huge step toward him and grabbed his chin tightly with one hand.

The next moment, Masamichi saw Shino’s beautiful face come close, and the next thing he knew, the specter pressed their lips together with tremendous force.

*Press* wasn’t the right word for his action.

To be more precise, Shino gnawed at the younger man’s mouth—which fell open in surprise—with the force of biting into a huge chunk of meat.

*H-hey, wh-what’s he doing to me?!*

Maybe it was what people called a kiss, but it was not that gentle.

It was cold, painful, and distressing as hell.

Wildly devouring Masamichi’s lips, Shino screwed his ice-cold tongue into the young man’s mouth, pushing away the resisting tongue and trying to force his own tongue down the young man’s throat.

The word *predation* that had once crossed his mind resurfaced.

Too upset to breathe properly, Masamichi’s vision became darker and darker.

*Wait, I can’t breathe. And...I’m losing my strength...*

With a jerk, Masamichi’s knees buckled. As if on cue, Shino’s lips finally parted from Masamichi’s, as did the hand that had held his chin like a vise. Dazed, Masamichi slumped down on the tatami mat.

“I needed a bit of your *energy*,” Shino said as Masamichi breathed heavily, looking satisfied as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I keep asking you...to explain...first.”

That was all Masamichi could manage until he asked, “What...are you going to do with my *energy*?”

In response to Masamichi’s question, Shino opened the fan in front of his face and blew a long, thin breath. Masamichi noticed it was glowing faintly.

The golden light...was the color of his *energy*.

“Shino, don’t tell me you’ve...”

“I shared your *energy* with the fan’s artifact spirit and gave it life. Take this. It will mask you with an illusion if you wish. Enjoy your payback time.”

“You’re telling me to enjoy taking revenge? What the heck...? Uh, th-thanks.”

Masamichi accepted the fan without understanding what was happening, thought for a moment, closed it, and put it in the breast pocket of his T-shirt.

It wasn’t a large pocket, but then the fan was a small child’s fan, so he figured it wouldn’t fall out.

“What specifically am I supposed to do?”

“You’ll know when the time comes.”

“Ngh...what are you going to do?”

Shino flashed that predator’s smile again.

“I have a plan. I wasn’t going to do this, but I have just the thing.”

“Just the thing?”

“Look forward to it. All right, then—it appears they’ve returned. It’s about time we took action.”

Masamichi couldn’t hear anything, but Shino’s specter ears seemed to pick up the sound of the men’s footsteps from afar.

“Shino?”

Shino turned out the lights in the tea room without responding. The entire first floor became pitch-black despite the streetlight that shone in through the small window.



Masamichi sensed Shino's footsteps subtly move away.

It appeared that he was walking down the aisle in the center of the store toward the entrance.

The familiar cool sound of the Nambu ironware tongs rang, and Masamichi heard the doorknob being turned.

*Shino, wait. Are you going to open the door?*

The faint creak of the wooden door opening echoed in Masamichi's startled ears and then a man's voice.

"What the hell?" it said.

Masamichi jumped.

*It's him!*

He'd heard the strangely high-pitched, metallic voice before.

*That voice. It's the guy from the hit-and-run, who came back to check and said, "Oh, shit. Shit!" ...It's the guy who was in the car.*

Then three men entered through the door Shino had opened—cautiously and nervously.

The glow of the streetlights made their silhouettes clear to Masamichi.

But neither Shino, hiding by the door, nor Masamichi, in the back of the dark house, seemed visible to the men.

"Hey, something's weird about this house. Oww! I just bumped into something!"

"Huh? Maybe it's a warehouse or something. Stuff is piled up here like crazy."

"Ooh, a warehouse. Isn't that perfect for that broad to hide, huh? She has to be here."

"The door opened on its own. Maybe God is showing us the way, ha-ha-ha. Hey, Miz Reporter! What was your name again...? Yumiko? Come out, come out, wherever you are. Let's have some fun."

"Yeah, we'll show you a good time before we kill you."

The men laughed vulgarly, bumping into things as they entered the narrow aisle.

Masamichi heard clunks and thuds as the items they shoved out of the way lost their balance and fell into one another and on the floor.

“Why is it so tight in here?! Damn, it’s single-file traffic.”

“There’s no such thing. Just one-way traffic.”

“Yeah? Hey, listen to this—the guy who ignored one-way traffic and ran over somebody is saying something. Geez, you were lucky that time. I thought your luck finally ran out, but the body just vanished, and you didn’t even have to do anything about it. Heck, it wasn’t even a case. Maybe some dog ate it.”

“Huh? Then we have to thank it. You know, we’ve got God protecting us. That’s why we’ve been able to do anything we please. Hey, Yumiko! There’s no point trying to run from us, so come on out. We’ll wait right here till you do.”

“You looked like you didn’t know men. We’ll teach you everything before you die!”

Something snapped in his mind as Masamichi listened to the men’s crude remarks.

All his life, he had been like the air he breathed—unobtrusive, unseen, unnoticed—and had never been seriously angry at anyone.

Even if people said or did things he didn’t like, he could get by if he continued to be that way.

Letting others see his efforts to be patient or trying to get back at them would only entertain those who wished him harm. They would only gain more momentum.

Masamichi had learned by watching the other kids at school being bullied.

Remain neutral as if nothing happened. Then the tormentors would forget him and move on to their next target, the same way they switch channels from one boring TV show to another.

The habit of pretending not to have negative emotions—like frustration, anger, and sadness—and living quietly and safely in solitude had become

ingrained.

He thought it was the only way of life available to a weak person who had nothing going for them.

That was why he had turned a blind eye to the fact that he was the victim of a hit-and-run accident, telling himself all that mattered was that he was now living happily.

But the moment he heard the men before him talk the way they did was the first time a tiny spark ignited in Masamichi's heart.

*I'm not going to forgive them.*

The three considered his life, Matsuoka's life, and probably the lives of others as junk or trash.

Like picking up a silly toy on a whim, playing with it a little, and then throwing it away, they played with the lives of others without the slightest remorse.

"I'm not going to forgive them."

Finally, the words left his mouth. As if in response, the small fan in his pocket shook. Masamichi thought it was like a warrior trembling in anticipation before a battle.

"Oh?! Is someone here?"

"So, Yumiko, you finally give up, huh? Good girl. Now come out here."

"Some good girl you are. We've been looking all over for you. Don't put us through that kind of trouble... Huh?!?!"

*Clatter.*

Moving down the aisle in single file, the men stopped as if they had been kicked away.

It was because a jumping sound came from somewhere, and a figure appeared hazily down the aisle.

"Yumiko...it isn't, is it? Who the hell are you?!"

"Why are you glowing? It's weird... Ugh!"

The three men gasped, trying to determine who the suddenly appearing figure could be.

It was Masamichi...standing in their path.

But it wasn't the same young man he had been a moment ago.

Blood dripped down his head like it had been poured over him, his clothes were torn, and the arms he stretched toward the men were bent and swaying oddly.

It was exactly how he'd looked when he had been hit by their car.

Shino had given the fan's artifact spirit a heavy dose of Masamichi's chi, and the spirit was covering his body with an illusion it had created to take revenge on the men who were tormenting and trying to harm his new master.

*Wow, I can see the illusion, too. Gee, it's harsh...*

Masamichi felt sickened by the sight of himself enveloped in the illusion.

He had been on the verge of death immediately after the accident. Shaken up in various ways upon meeting Shino, he hadn't been able to accurately understand the extent of the damage done to his body.

The illusion the artifact spirit was now showing him was likely the state he was in that night, as Shino remembered.

*So this is how I'd looked, huh? And these people caused it...and they laughed and abandoned me.*

Anger welled up again, and Masamichi tried to take a step toward the men. However, his right leg was torn off, and it fell to the floor with a thud. Blood splattered everywhere.

"Whoa! Wh-what the hell?"

The man in the lead let out a high-pitched scream.

*This guy... He's the one who got out of the driver's seat. He's the one who ran over me.*

*"You...killed me."*

The voice coming out of Masamichi's mouth was eerily distorted.

Surprised by the extent of the hallucination's effects, Masamichi hopped on his left leg toward the men.

It was a small move, but the men freaked out. They mumbled, "You've gotta be kidding," and "Stop it," pushing and shoving to get away.

*"You ran over me and left me to rot. How could you laugh?"*

"Huh? Ran over you...? What the fuck? Don't tell me this is the body that disappeared?"

"He turned into a zombie? No, this is like a candid camera thing, right?"

"Why would someone do a candid camera trick on us? I mean, is this guy...a monster...?!"

*"I am not a monster. I am a human...a human being. I am not air."*

Once he started voicing his feelings, words continued to flow out of Masamichi's mouth.

*"I, too, am alive. I, too, have feelings. I, too, hated things, felt sad, suffered, got angry, and wanted to cry..."*

It wasn't so much Masamichi's anger at the men but perhaps an explosion of emotions he'd held back deep down in his chest. It was fury at himself for enduring things.

Surprised by his own words, Masamichi slowly leaped toward the men.

He knew the torn leg was an illusion the artifact spirit showed, but it was so real that he didn't think he could walk properly.

"Wh-what the hell is the guy saying? He isn't alive. He's gotta be dead."

"Yikes! He's a zombie! A real zombie! Like in a friggin' movie. Come on—let's get out of here."

"Quit talking and get moving!"

"I can't, dammit! There's too much junk lying around!"

But more bad luck befell the panicked threesome.

All the artifact spirits in the store began getting angry because the intruders

had mistreated their friends.

Various objects flew through the store, bumping into the men in the aisle and falling on their heads.

The men's panic worsened when they couldn't pinpoint what was attacking them from somewhere in the dark.

Coming at them from the front was Masamichi, covered in a blood-splattered illusion, moving strangely with his single leg and mumbling things that were incomprehensible to them.

They tried to head for the exit, but the piles of objects collapsed and made the aisle even narrower, so it was hard for them to turn around. Screaming as things flew at them from all directions, the men managed to get to the door they had left open...when it slammed shut.

"Eep!"

They yelped in terror.

Standing with his back to the door...was Shino.

The man at the rear managed to turn his body toward Shino and shouted angrily, "Who...who the hell are you?! What do you have against us?"

But Shino stood quietly, the dim outside light seeping through the window shining against his body.

*What is Shino going to do?*

All eyes were on the specter. Masamichi was restless, seeing Shino appear as if to say he was the star of the show.

"How dare you humiliate my servant? You also attempted to harm my client," Shino said quietly as he stared at the men.

He wasn't raising his voice, but the low tone echoed in the store, making the men shiver.

"Wh-what...are you talking about?"

"Move! We'll get out of here without doing anything."

"Yeah, that's right. We have no use for you or your zombie. We have nothing

to do with you!”

“You don’t? I see. I thought after a little threatening, you would admit your guilt. But it seems you don’t even have that much conscience. If that’s the case...it should be all right to *feed it* a little.”

*Huh?!*

Masamichi cowered in astonishment.

*What is Shino saying...? Tokifuyu ordered him not to attack and eat people. Oh, wait a second. Didn’t he say “feed it”? What does he mean?*

While Masamichi was losing his composure, Shino was slowly rubbing his stomach.

He touched the area around the pit of his stomach over his thin cotton shirt.

“Hey!! Are you listening?!”

“Never mind. Just go for it. The guy’s tall but looks weak, and he isn’t armed.”

With that said, the men pulled folding knives out of their jeans and cargo pants pockets.

The ghoulish Masamichi aside, they must have thought that blades would be useful against Shino, who looked human—though it was the other way around.

Armed with knives, the men moved down the aisle and inched their way up to Shino.

*Shino... What’s he going to do? What happens to a specter’s—I mean, Tokifuyu’s so-called “vessel”—when someone slashes at it with a knife? It would surely get scratched. It’s dangerous for him to be out there unarmed!*

Forgetting he was a bloody phantom, Masamichi tried to run up to Shino.

When Shino barked a short order: “*Get out.*”

And just as he had grabbed Masamichi’s chin earlier, he put a hand to his own...and the next moment, the men’s screams echoed through the store.

Shino’s beautiful, statue-like face had transformed.

His shapely lower jaw dropped to his collarbone with a clunk, his upper lip

rolled back, and his mouth opened wide like a cave.

The men screamed in terror as a huge, jet-black, ball-like object opened its mouth inside Shino's maw and attacked them.

The silhouette was humorous, reminiscent of Pac-Man, but the long fangs that lined the gaping mouth were more frightening than funny.

"Oh!!"

Masamichi also let out a yelp of surprise. He remembered the horror of being attacked by the apparition as soon as he saw its mouth.

It was the lower-class spirit that Shino had lured out of that vase, using Masamichi as bait.

Masamichi thought Shino had eaten it then, but it appeared the spirit continued to survive in Shino's body.

Since Shino had eaten its torso, the spirit only had a head, which had been about the size of a fat eel but was now large and swollen.

The spirit easily caught up with the men who were running away with inaudible screams. It opened its huge mouth and bit into their heads, one by one.

Strangely enough, despite being bitten by countless fangs, the men's heads and faces weren't the least bit hurt. But a gas-like substance leaked gently from where the fangs had pierced them and was sucked into the spirit's mouth.

"Ugh..."

Masamichi watched the scene in astonishment.

With the gas extracted, the men stood still, with their eyes wide open. They said nothing, looked vacant, and their bodies slowly swayed.

It was as if they had gone into a vegetative state.

Shino nodded in satisfaction and raised a hand.

As if on cue, the spirit quickly shrank to the size of a Ping-Pong ball and attached itself to the palm of Shino's hand. Grabbing it like a ball, Shino easily set his jaw back in place, put the demon in his mouth, and swallowed it down in



a gulp.

“Sh-Shino, are you okay...? Whoa!”

The illusion that had covered Masamichi’s body was gone.

Now thinking it was okay to walk as he normally did, he started for Shino, tripped over something on the floor, and fell with a heavy thud.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Shino asked Masamichi, looking appalled.

“Sorry, I tripped. I’ll apologize to the artifact spirits later. But more importantly, are you okay? That spirit was the one you ate, right? It was still around?”

Nodding, Shino slowly rubbed his palm around his solar plexus again.

“It’s the stubborn sort. Its head stayed inside me too long to digest, so I put it to use.”

Stunned, Masamichi looked up at Shino’s face, which was beautiful again.

“No way... You said it was all right to *feed it*.”

“Yes, I did. I can’t attack and eat people myself, but it’s none of my business if some other spirit attacks people. And it’s up to me whether I eat that spirit again. I am not doing anything against Tokifuyu’s curse.”

“Huh...? Huuuh...? But that black spirit. It was sucking the *energy* out of those men like crazy, and you ate it. That means you ate them.”

“I didn’t lay a finger on them, did I?” Shino said with a cool face.

“I have a feeling...that Tokifuyu must have had a tough time dealing with you, Shino. I can understand that a little.”

“Did you say something?”

“Uh, n-no! Nothing!”

“Humph.”

Shino moved the scattered items on the floor, stepped before Masamichi, and knelt on one knee. Then, more gently than before, he covered Masamichi’s lips with his own, so tenderly that it could be called a real kiss, licked them with the

tip of his tongue, and quickly pulled back.

“Hey...Shino!”

“I’m cleansing my palate. You went so easy with your payback that I gave you a hand. At least let me do this much... The *energy* of rotten human beings tastes stale. It will take some effort to digest it and the spirit I ate,” Shino said matter-of-factly and stood up.

Masamichi involuntarily put a hand to his lips. The coldness of Shino’s lips and tongue seemed to linger on the skin.

*Geez...can’t he see that I’m not a Westerner who can kiss people casually?*

He was very tempted to complain but couldn’t get mad at Shino when he considered that the specter had helped him get his revenge.

Besides, seeing the men wandering before him was too creepy and disturbing.

“Shino, what about these people...?”

“Oh yes, the spirit ate much of their *energy*. They will be without their souls for a while.”

“What?! W-will they be okay?”

“I don’t know if it will be days or weeks, but they will eventually get their souls back, though their recent memories will be gone. Depending on how much *energy* the spirit in my belly ate, it could be months or years...”

“Oh! Does that mean...they’ll forget they ran over me? And they’ll also forget about Miss Matsuoka?”

“Probably,” Shino affirmed.

“Then Miss Matsuoka will be okay now?”

“Yes. But don’t mention it to her. We don’t want her so relieved that she’ll do something reckless again.”

In contrast to Shino’s frown, Masamichi’s facial muscles finally relaxed.

“Yeah, okay. Wow... I’m relieved. I’m glad these people haven’t turned into mush or anything. But if they lose their memories, I wonder if they won’t learn their lesson and do bad things again.”

“That won’t happen. Fear beyond the imaginable is etched deeply on the soul. If they tried to do something bad again, their horror tonight would come back to them, and they wouldn’t be able to move. The same way they are now.”

Shino opened the door again and ordered the men to get out.

Their knives fell to the floor, and they walked out the door with unsteady steps, swaying their upper bodies like “the zombies” they had earlier called Masamichi.

“W-will they be...okay?”

“You are such a softy to worry about scoundrels like them. They will only be in their current state until morning at the most. They will return to their senses by daybreak and have no idea why they’re here or what they’re doing.”

“I repeat, it’s a relief to hear that...”

Masamichi exhaled a sigh of relief.

After closing the door and locking up, Shino looked at Masamichi with exasperation.

“How long do you intend to stay slumped on the floor like that? Hurry up and get on your feet.”

Masamichi shook his head pitifully.

“Sorry, Shino. I think I twisted my right ankle when I fell, though I haven’t lost my leg like in that illusion.”

“Let me see it.”

Shino got down on one knee in front of Masamichi, grabbed the leg, and bent his ankle in different directions. Masamichi yelped.

“Ow!! Hey, Shino, give me a break. That really hurts.”

“Hmm.”

Shino nodded curtly and raised the hem of Masamichi’s cargo pants.

“It doesn’t look broken, but it’s swelling. You must have nicked a muscle.”

“P-probably. I think it’s a mild sprain.”

Masamichi looked at Shino with pleading eyes.

When he had been in that accident, Shino had eaten his torn leg, then reattached it to his body, setting it almost back to its previous state.

He knew it was brazen, but it was natural for Masamichi to think it would be easy for Shino to heal a mere sprain.

But acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Shino, still on one knee, turned his back to Masamichi.

“I have no choice, then. I’ll piggyback you to the tea room.”

“Huh?” Masamichi said dumbly, his guess off the mark. “Uh, is it possible that you, um, can’t...fix a sprain?”

Shino said disapprovingly, “All I have to do with a torn leg is fill in the missing pieces, but this is a muscle that hasn’t been severed, only slightly damaged. It’s a lot more complicated.”

“It is?”

“If you are asked to return a pastry you have eaten, you can buy a new one. But it would be difficult to return a pastry you have taken a bite out of back to its original state. It’s the same thing.”

“It *is*?”

“Just get on with it. Or are you going to stay there until you can walk again? I don’t mind respecting your wish if that’s what you want.”

Rushed by Shino’s impatient tone, Masamichi quickly put his weight on his left leg and sat up, supporting himself by pushing his hands against the floor. Then he placed his hand on Shino’s broad shoulder and gingerly leaned on him.

“I said, hurry up.”

Impatient with Masamichi’s faltering movements, Shino suddenly stood up as lithely as if he were carrying an empty backpack.

“Whoa!”

Carried on Shino’s back in a somewhat unstable position, Masamichi was startled. He clung to the specter’s neck and managed to avoid falling. The next

thing he knew, Shino had put his hands behind his thighs and held him firmly in place.

“Let’s go.”

With that, Shino began walking. The objects on the floor appeared to move slightly out of the way as if praising Shino for his actions.

“I’m sorry, guys,” Masamichi said on Shino’s back, apologizing to the goods for the trouble he caused. “I’ll clean up and put you away properly when I can walk again.”

*I can’t remember what it felt like to be given a piggyback ride.*

He felt a considerable shock with each step that Shino took.

It was the first time he’d had someone carry him on his back since his father’s piggyback rides when he was a child, and Masamichi couldn’t recall a single thing about what it was like back then.

*It’s pretty hard on my sprained ankle, but it sure beats walking. I wonder if this is what it would be like to ride a camel in the desert.*

As Masamichi entertained innocent fantasies like that, Shino kept walking, went up the stairs, and entered the tea room.

He set him down on a cushion surprisingly gently. Relieved, Masamichi thanked him.

“Thanks. Hey, Shino? Is this what it was like when you brought me here after the accident?”

It was a somewhat sentimental question for Masamichi as he reflected on the night of their encounter, but Shino replied practically, “Things were tough that time. I had to remember to take all the different body parts scattered on the road home with me so I could put you back together, so I ripped your clothes, wrapped those limbs in the fabric, and tied them around your neck. As for you, I hoisted you on my shoulder, switched to holding you under my arm...”

The indifference with which Shino described the situation made it all too real to Masamichi, who felt groggy and pressed his forehead against the nape of Shino’s neck.

“Um, thank you for everything you did. But, hey, body parts? Thinking about it now, that illusion the fan showed me? I must have really been like that after the accident.”

Shino sat cross-legged on the tatami mat and nodded vaguely.

“Well, generally, yes.”

“Huh? Generally? What do you mean by that?”

“I increased the amount of blood a bit.”

“...You did?”

“It’s more impressive that way.”

Shino’s nonchalant attitude stunned Masamichi until a question eventually came to mind.

“Hey, Shino? I know this is a minor detail, but...”

“What now?”

Masamichi took a reserved but direct approach to his master, who seemed to think him a hassle.

“I think you said before that you drank and licked all my blood that time.”

“So what?”

“You said blood was pooling at the accident scene. Didn’t you...drink that?”

A serious scowl appeared on Shino’s face, and he flicked Masamichi’s forehead with his fingers.

“Ow! Why did you do that? That hurt, Shino.” Masamichi pressed his hands against his forehead and complained with tears in his eyes.

“It serves you right for being disrespectful to your master. Are you telling me to crawl on my knees and lick your blood off the ground?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. But you picked up my leg and gnawed on it, you know?”

“That was different.”

Unashamedly bluffing like a human, Shino glanced at Yumiko Matsuoka, who

slept peacefully on a cushion.

“The person at the center of this issue is sleeping ever so peacefully.”

Masamichi looked at her sleeping face, more defenseless than when she was awake, and smiled.

“She loves her fan and wants to protect it. I’m glad she didn’t see anything scary. Don’t you feel the same way?” he said, pulling the fan out of his pocket. It did a quick shake in his hand, seeming to agree with what Masamichi said.

“Thanks for helping me get payback. Keep protecting Miss Matsuoka, okay?”

Masamichi gently placed it in Matsuoka’s left hand, which was sticking out from underneath the towel.

Matsuoka responded to the faint contact and let out a low groan, gripping her fan tightly as she slept.

“I wonder if that settles things. I wonder if Miss Matsuoka will sleep until morning?”

“Probably. Let her sleep. You can sleep in my room tonight. It’s too much trouble carrying you upstairs.” With that, Shino turned his back toward Masamichi again.

“Uh, thanks again for your help.”

While feeling sorry about troubling Shino again, Masamichi felt warmth and happiness inside as Shino carried him on his back...

The next morning, Yumiko Matsuoka’s surprised voice echoed in the tea room at Bougyoudou.

“I can’t believe it. Do you get to eat fantastic breakfasts like this every morning?”

Masamichi scratched his head and nodded.

Matsuoka slept soundly until morning, bathed, shed her damp clothes, and borrowed Masamichi’s T-shirt and sweats.

Then she sat down to breakfast with Shino and Masamichi.

The breakfast lineup consisted of boiled spinach; fried lotus root; Spanish

mackerel pickled in sweet miso bean paste, which Shino had ordered by mail and enjoyed every morning with Masamichi; miso soup with tomato and okra; and salted rice balls made with leftover rice from the night before.

“It’s like breakfast served at a Japanese inn. Mr. Tatsumi, you really are good at cooking.”

Matsuoka’s words of praise didn’t particularly please Shino. All he did was continue to sip his miso soup, looking grumpy.

“Masamichi, how I envy you. I’d love to come over for another breakfast like this...again...”

Matsuoka put down her chopsticks, looked serious, and bowed deeply to Shino and Masamichi.

“I don’t know how I fell asleep last night. Something must have been wrong with me. I’m sorry. Masamichi told me that you fought off the people who were after me. Thank you so much.”

Shino still didn’t respond.

Unable to resist, Masamichi turned to Shino.

“Shino. At least say something.”

“It wasn’t us.”

“Huh?!”

Both Matsuoka and Masamichi were stunned to hear Shino’s quiet words.

Shino put his wooden bowl back on the table, put down his chopsticks, and looked at Matsuoka.

“Masamichi and I gave your fan a little help. That’s all we did.”

Understanding what Shino was trying to say, Masamichi’s face broke into a smile as he agreed.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Your fan was the star of the show. It did the fighting because it loves you and wants to be with you forever.”

“...The fan? Fight? Well, when I woke up, I was clutching it. That was kind of weird, but it was very reassuring.”



Without hesitation, Shino said curtly, “That’s how things went. You do remember your vow, don’t you? You swore by that fan...”

“Yes, I remember. I will cherish it for the rest of my life, give up looking into the hit-and-run accident, and never...come back to this place again. The last condition is tough, but I deserve it after all the trouble I’ve caused you. I won’t write an article about it, either. I promise.”

“Fine. Don’t ever forget it. Your vow to me is more significant than you can imagine.”

Matsuoka nodded. Masamichi didn’t think she would ever dream that she had made a pact with a specter, but she must have sensed the somewhat disturbing atmosphere that Shino created.

“All right, then. Now eat up and be on your way.” As blunt as ever, Shino added, sounding unconcerned, “There’s more rice balls and miso soup in the kitchen. Go and get them yourself.”

“Pfft!”

Masamichi burst into laughter.

*It’s impossible to tell if Shino’s cold or nice.*

“What?”

“N-nothing. I was just wondering if I should get more food myself.”

“Do what you want,” Shino said grimly, rubbing his solar plexus through his shirt again. Neither the dark spirit nor the *energy* it had swallowed from the three bad guys would likely digest for a while.

*I guess stomach pills...wouldn’t help him. Life must be tough for a specter.*

Masamichi glanced at his master with concern in his eyes.

After breakfast, Matsuoka’s suit was as free of dirt and as dry as possible, and she bid a formal farewell to Shino and Masamichi.

The specter, who wasn’t accustomed to saying hello or good-bye, sat in the tea room with his paper spread before him and didn’t spare her a glance, but Masamichi walked her out.

Fortunately, he had awakened in the morning and found that his sprain had recovered so that it only hurt a little when he walked. Masamichi figured Shino had tried to heal him while he was asleep but decided to pretend not to notice since his master would likely deny it.

“Okay, then—thank you so much for everything. Please give my best wishes to Mr. Tatsumi,” Matsuoka said, continuing to thank Masamichi profusely as they walked out of the store. Masamichi smiled and waved with both hands.

“The fan did all the work...but please be careful with your coverage.”

Matsuoka nodded with a smile at Masamichi’s heartfelt words. She put her mouth against his ear and whispered, “Last night...I woke up in the middle of the night. Something terrifying came out of Mr. Tatsumi’s mouth, and...”

“...!”

Masamichi gasped and lost his balance.

*She saw that...! What should I do?*

Masamichi was rattled.

But Matsuoka continued with a smile on her face. “I’m tempted to chase after whatever it was, but I give up. I must have been having some weird dream.”

“...Miss Matsuoka.”

“Mr. Tatsumi is mysterious, but I think he’s kind at heart. Masamichi, you work for a good person.”

“Yes, I do!”

Relieved, Masamichi cheerfully agreed.

“Take care. I’ll do my best with my precious fan. And I’ll be sure...to keep my promise. We may never see each other again...but if we cross paths someday, let me wink at you. I won’t call out to you.”

Then Matsuoka stepped back. And she waved in a small gesture.

“I can’t wink...,” Masamichi said.

“Then you can blink. Give me two big blinks. I’ll be looking forward to it. I’m sure we’ll cross paths because tangled threads aren’t easily untangled, right?”

See you, Masamichi!”

“Right. See you!”

She turned around several times to wave and crossed to the other side of the road.

“Take care,” Masamichi said to her back as it disappeared from view. Then he stretched and took a deep breath of the clean morning air.

The sky was clearer than in a long time, and it looked like the day would be hot.

“I’d better clean up the objects on the floor before I go to class,” Masamichi reminded himself, then psyched himself up and skipped back into the house...

## EPILOGUE

“Huh?!”

Masamichi came home from prep school as usual and noticed that Bougyoudou’s door was locked.

“I wonder if Shino is out.”

He hadn’t mentioned anything about going out when they had breakfast that morning, but Shino wasn’t someone who contacted, discussed, or told others about his plans like a responsible adult.

It wasn’t unusual for him to be out when Masamichi came home.

But today, he had left the OPEN FOR BUSINESS sign on the door. Perhaps he had suddenly gone out on a whim or had an urgent appointment.

“Maybe he’s gone somewhere to stock up on goods. Okay, where did I put my key...?”

Masamichi was about to search through his shoulder bag when he noticed the building next to the store.

Bougyoudou, where Shino and Masamichi lived, was situated in the middle of a residential area, but their neighbors on either side weren’t residential. On one side was a monthly parking lot; on the other was a one-story warehouse with a very high ceiling.

The shutters on the street-facing side of the warehouse were slightly raised on this day.

*I’ve never seen those shutters open before. I wonder what’s inside.*

Masamichi bent down but couldn’t see inside as the lights were off.

All he could make out were buckets and stepladders near the shutters.

*Is it a workshop or something?*

Masamichi was gazing blankly at the place when a small, elderly man climbed out beneath the shutters. He wore a classic but stylish short-sleeved open-collared shirt, slacks, and a panama hat.

He uttered an “oh!” when his eyes met Masamichi’s and promptly removed his hat. “Hello.”

Because the older man beat him to the greeting, Masamichi quickly bowed his head.

“H-hello!”

Although he was shy, Masamichi’s voice was loud when he greeted people. It was kind of a conditioned reflex from his days working at a pub.

The man walked up to Masamichi and examined his face with interest.

“I haven’t seen you before. Are you Daizo’s grandson or something?”

Masamichi quickly denied it.

“Oh no. I’m a...um, a live-in clerk here.”

“Ah. Bougyoudou must be doing well with its new generation of management. It can afford to hire live-in help... Oh! Excuse me. It’s wonderful when a business is thriving.” He let out a “ha-ha-ha,” put his hat back on, and pointed to his own tanned face. “My name is Kanaya, and I live next door to the liquor store around back. Your previous owner, Daizo, was very kind to me.”

“Oh, you’re an officer of the neighborhood association. Excuse me, where are my manners? I’m Masamichi Adachi.”

Masamichi’s polite self-introduction brought a wide grin to the man’s—Kanaya’s—face.

“Masamichi. How do you do? It’s good to see more young people in town. I hope you stay for a long time. Will you be here this fall?”

Masamichi was perplexed.

“This fall? Yes, probably.”

Since Masamichi was a servant, he would be around if Shino didn’t kick him

out...but he couldn't tell Kanaya that and answered vaguely. But Kanaya seemed satisfied and clapped his hands, which seemed large for his size.

"That's great. I would love for you and Tatsumi to participate in our autumn festival."

Masamichi blinked in surprise.

"A festival? You have a festival here in autumn? And Shino...I mean, Mr. Tatsumi takes part? Really?"

Unable to believe that the usually taciturn and unfriendly specter would participate in a local festival, Masamichi couldn't help the surprise in his voice. Kanaya nodded, appearing curious as to why Masamichi was startled.

"Yep. At first, Daizo invited him. He didn't seem enthusiastic about it, and I was initially rude, thinking that people might feel unsettled, having a handsome but grumpy man like him come to the festival. But he's surprisingly strong, right? He did a great job pulling the float."

"...Oh!"

Masamichi clapped once in understanding.

Shino had excellent physical ability, even if his late master, Tokifuyu, had detracted from it. It made perfect sense to Masamichi, who watched Shino move heavy antiques around with ease every day.

"Did you say a float? You have a float in this town?"

"Yep, right here. Didn't you know?"

"So this is where you keep a float! I didn't know that. No wonder it has a high ceiling."

"Yeah, it's called Yamagura. Would you like to take a look since you're here? Though I warn you, it's under maintenance now. We're fixing it up for autumn, so it looks naked and a little pitiful."

Kanaya then opened the shutters halfway. The afternoon light shone inside, and Masamichi could see the front of the float.

As Kanaya said, most of the decorations had been removed, and it looked

ancient but sturdy, built as a solid wooden structure.

“It’s secondhand. Everyone pitched in, and we bought it twenty years ago. Daizo, the previous owner of Bougyoudou, used his contacts in the antique business and found it for us. He even negotiated the price. He was a big help that time.”

“That’s a lovely story that shows the ties between you and Daizo!”

Seeing how impressed Masamichi was, Kanaya pointed at his chest with pride.

“That’s right. And since I’m a cabinetmaker, I oversee the decorations. I came here between jobs today to measure the parts we have to repair. I was about to leave when I ran into you.”

“I see.”

“We also have a plasterer, tatami-mat maker, kimono maker, lantern maker—we all pitch in to repair the float, build new parts, decorate it, and make it look great. It will look so fantastic on the day of the festival that you might not recognize it,” Kanaya said, smiling.

His love for the float and pride as a professional were obvious, giving Masamichi a wonderful impression of Kanaya.

“I’ll be looking forward to the festival,” he managed, unable to think of anything clever to say. Kanaya’s face crinkled as he smiled, laughed happily, and lightly slapped Masamichi on the back.

“You do that. And again, it would be great if you could participate in the festival with Tatsumi. I leave it to you to bring him with you.”

Kanaya said good-bye, closed the shutters tight, and left.

“...And that’s what happened. I had no idea they kept a float next door.”

That evening, Masamichi made tea for Shino when he returned home and told him about his exchange with Kanaya.

As Masamichi had guessed, Shino had gone out to stock up on goods, which Shino was now arranging on the low table. He didn’t give a single response, but Masamichi spoke to him from the kitchen, believing that he was listening.

“I heard you participate in the autumn festivals and pull the float. I didn’t expect you to be a fan of festivals. I was surprised when Mr. Kanaya told me.”

Shino then pulled an old-looking pocket watch on a chain out of his bag, inspected it, and said uninterestedly, “I go to the festival every year, but I don’t remember ever saying I liked it. What is wrong with you?”

Relieved that Shino *had* been listening to him, Masamichi poured the boiled water he had cooled slightly into a teapot and carried it and teacups to the table.

“But you participate every year, don’t you? Even if Daizo asked you to do that, you wouldn’t if you didn’t want to, would you?”

Shino took his hand off his pocket watch and sniffed.

“Do you think I’ve had a grand time pulling that float?”

“Haven’t you?”

“No. All I’ve done is pull that float and eat legitimately.”

Masamichi poured tea into the two teacups and tilted his head at Shino’s unexpected reply.

“Legitimately? What do you mean?”

Shino replied in a tone that spoke of common sense.

“A festival tends to raise people’s spirits without consequences.”

“That’s true. The performances and displays are fun, and there are stalls, too, making things merry for everyone. I get excited just to hear the music. You enjoy it, too, don’t you?”

Shino pouted.

“Enjoyment is a sensation that human beings go and feel all on their own. It has nothing to do with me.”

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” Masamichi said, confused.

Shino looked bored and added, “Humans who get excited at a festival spread excess *energy* all over the place without even being asked to. My once-a-year pleasure is to eat that up. Only at a festival can I openly devour human *energy*—



especially that of children.”

Masamichi was appalled by what was such a typically Shino style of *obtaining pleasure* that he burst out laughing.

“Oh, I get it! Tokifuyu’s rules forbid you from attacking and eating humans, but it’s okay to take people’s excess *energy*, huh? So to you, a festival is like a buffet.”

“That about sums it up, although I have you now, so I don’t have that much trouble finding *energy*,” Shino said, then picked up a rice cake Masamichi had brought to accompany the tea and bit off about half the cake.

Shino usually said human food was just a snack for him, but from what Masamichi had seen, he seemed to have quite a sweet tooth. And he always had a sweet before drinking his tea.

It appeared that Yoriko, the previous owner’s wife, had some knowledge of Japanese tea ceremony and occasionally practiced with her husband and Shino.

Shino’s habit of first eating a sweet was probably in line with tea ceremony etiquette.

*Shino is certainly conscientious.*

Impressed, Masamichi took a small oval-shaped rice cake with sweet bean paste filling and took a small bite of one end. The crispy outer layer and the sticky red bean paste made a lovely contrast.

“So, Shino, aren’t you attending the festival this year? Mr. Kanaya said he wants us to be there,” Masamichi said, sounding concerned.

But Shino munched on the remaining half of his sweet and said indistinctly, “Yes.”

Masamichi tilted his head in surprise.

“Yes, you’re participating? But you said you don’t have much trouble finding *energy* now since you have me. Doesn’t that mean you no longer have to go to the festival?”

Carelessly taking a sip of his hot tea without even blowing on it to cool it down, Shino said, “The more human *energy* I have, the more powerful I

become. Besides, that amount of *energy* isn't really overwhelming."

"I wouldn't know how much *energy* a specter needs to feel full. But anyway, I'll be able to participate in this year's festival with you!"

Masamichi beamed with the bright positivity of his youth. It was Shino's turn to squint his almond eyes suspiciously.

"Why are you so happy? Do you want to pull the float that badly?"

Shyly but honestly, Masamichi nodded.

"We didn't have major festivals in my hometown, so I've never been involved in a float for a parade or anything like that. I won't be embarrassed to death if you're there with me."

"Why would you be embarrassed?"

"It's hard to explain...but I'm embarrassed just to do things in front of people, let alone participate in some event."

"You're a complicated one. I've been watching people for a thousand years and still don't understand them. But anyway."

Shino pushed the teacup, which he had just taken a sip from, toward Masamichi.

"This tea is weak, servant."

"Oh!

Masamichi's expression changed instantly, and he stood up.

"Sorry. I'm a little stingy with tea leaves. It's a habit I formed when I lived alone. I'll make another brew."

Shino wasn't particularly angry with Masamichi, who was in a great hurry to gather the teacups and teapot on the tray. He said matter-of-factly, "There's a saying that too much of a good thing is bad, but it doesn't apply to tea. If it's too strong, you only need to dilute it. But you can't strengthen weak tea and end up wasting all the tea leaves."

Masamichi, who was on his way back to the kitchen, paused and turned around.

*Oops. I was about to add more tea leaves to the pot and infuse it again.*

“Hey, Shino?”

“What?”

“You said a minute ago that you’ve been watching people for a thousand years and still don’t understand us, but it isn’t like that at all. You know everything I’ve been trying to do, right?”

Shino popped another sweet in his mouth and mumbled, “I don’t know humans. I’m speaking for myself.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Every time Tokifuyu asked for barley tea, I would toss some roasted barley into a cup of boiling water and be scolded that it was too weak and had no flavor. He was easygoing about most things, but he was finicky when it came to food and drink. He repeated the same thing to me that it became annoying that strong tea could be diluted, but no expert could make weak tea strong.”

“...Oh!”

“And he reprimanded me when I added roasted barley to the water I boiled again. He’d say, *‘You can’t make good barley tea like that. Now you’ve wasted the barley you began with and the barley you added.’* It was annoying, but thinking back, he was right. No matter what you’re doing, it’s essential to determine the right amount at the outset.”

As Masamichi listened, his impatience disappeared, and a simple smile returned.

*I get it. That complaint Shino made was what Tokifuyu used to say to him. And it means...Shino used to do what I’m doing now.*

After a thousand years, the rough, spoiled child that Masamichi saw in his dream one night had become the calm, intelligent, and strong man he now spoke with. A warm feeling of respect and affinity welled up in Masamichi’s heart.

“What are you grinning about? Don’t just stand there. Hurry up and make the tea.”

“Okay.”

This time, Masamichi gave him a leisurely reply and went to the kitchen.

He boiled a fresh kettle of tea, washed the teapot, and measured the proper amount of tea leaves with a spoon.

He took great care in doing things right this time, and a smile never disappeared from Masamichi’s face.

Masamichi glanced quickly at Shino and saw that he had finished his second sweet and was carefully gathering the small pieces of the cake that had fallen on the table into the palm of his hand and throwing it away in the trash can.

Shino sometimes did that sort of thing. He would be incredibly meticulous and somewhat domestic, something you wouldn’t expect from a specter. All those actions must have been what his late *master* used to do.

*Tokifuyu must have taken great care of him. But then why did he end up locking Shino in a jar? I don’t get it, though I can tell that it must have hurt Shino terribly.*

The prideful Shino would never admit to *getting hurt* and would be furious if he learned that Masamichi thought he had. Still, some truths came across naturally in Shino’s nostalgic, somewhat pained expression when he talked about Tokifuyu.

Despite his master’s terrible betrayal, Shino still mixed with humans—even if only to survive—coexisted with them, and kept Masamichi as a servant. Masamichi thought that deep down, he may still want to trust humans.

*I didn’t become Shino’s servant because I wanted to... And he’s really scary when I sometimes remember he’s a specter and not human. Still, I...*

The iron kettle whistled to indicate that the water had boiled.

First, pouring boiling water into teacups and then transferring it to a teapot was a method Shino had taught him since he came to Bougyoudou.

*Shino has already given me many things. I don’t know how long he will keep me as his servant...and I’ll never be someone like him, but it would be nice if I could repay him somehow. No, that isn’t right. I must find a way.*

“The first order of business is to make a good cup of tea.”

Muttering to himself a line that some comedian once said to start small and work your way up, Masamichi methodically began pouring green tea into two teacups...

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