

THE HAUNTED BOOKSTORE

Gateway to a
Parallel Universe

— 7 —

By Shinobumaru

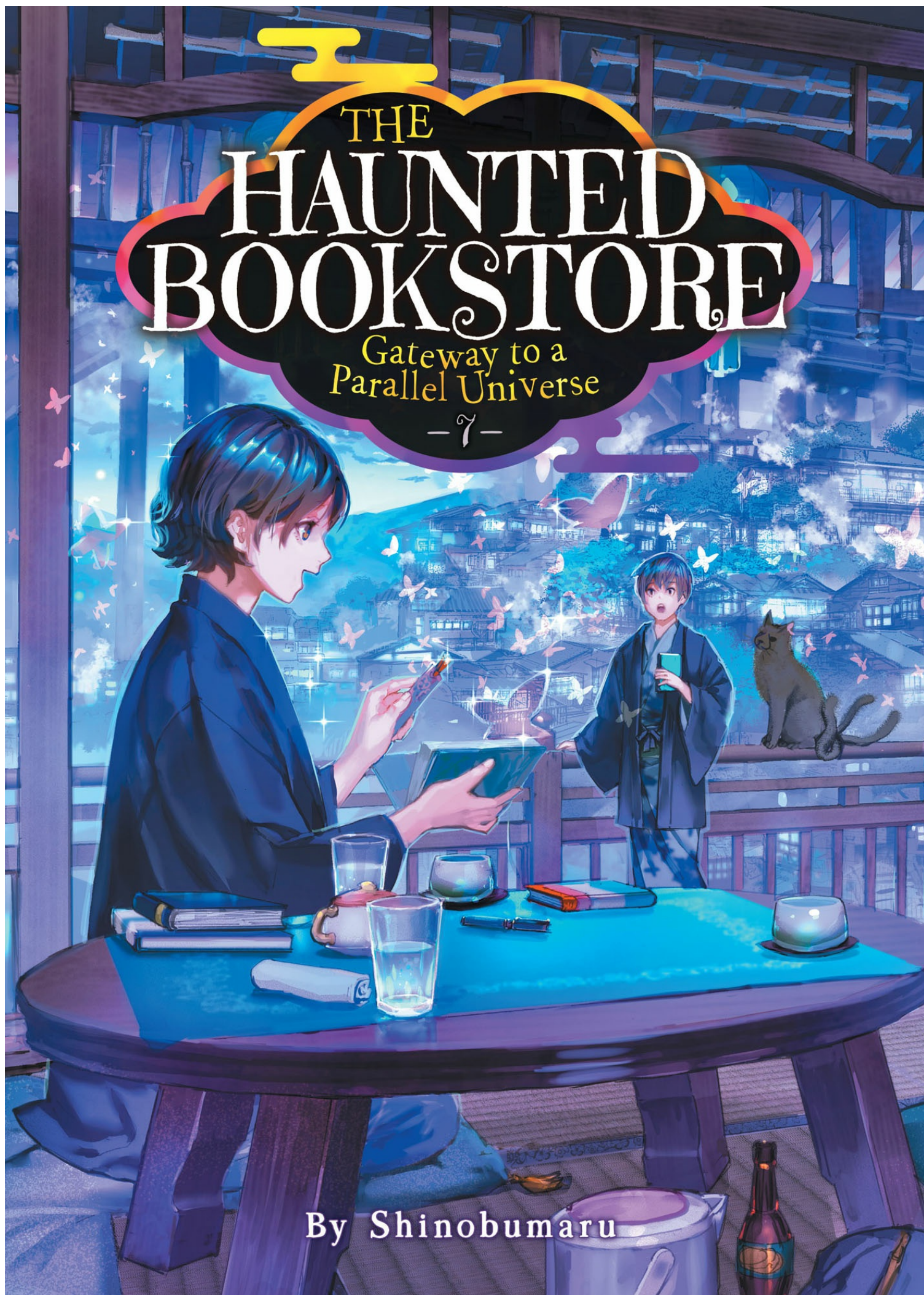


Table of Contents

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Dawn of Spring](#)

[Chapter 2: The Swallows' Nest](#)

[Chapter 3: Gentlemen's Late Summer](#)

[Chapter 4: Father and Son](#)

[Chapter 5: Old Enough](#)

[Side Story: Two-Sided Smile](#)

[Chapter 6: The Final Day](#)

[Extra: Short Story Collection](#)

[Short Story: The Second Suimei](#)

[Short Story: Suimei in the Spirit Realm](#)

[Short Story: Kuro versus Akamadara](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Newsletter](#)



Wagaya wa Kakuriyo no kashihonya san Novel 7

©Shinobumaru (Story)

This edition originally published in Japan in 2022 by

MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with

MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent

to press@gomanga.com.

Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Molly Lee

ADAPTATION: Jack Hamm

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner

PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen

EDITOR: Laurel Ashgrove

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar

VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold

PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-68579-657-0

Printed in Canada

First Printing: January 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



VOLUME 7
Butterfly Dreams

WRITTEN BY
Shinobumaru

TRANSLATED BY
Molly Lee



Seven Seas Entertainment

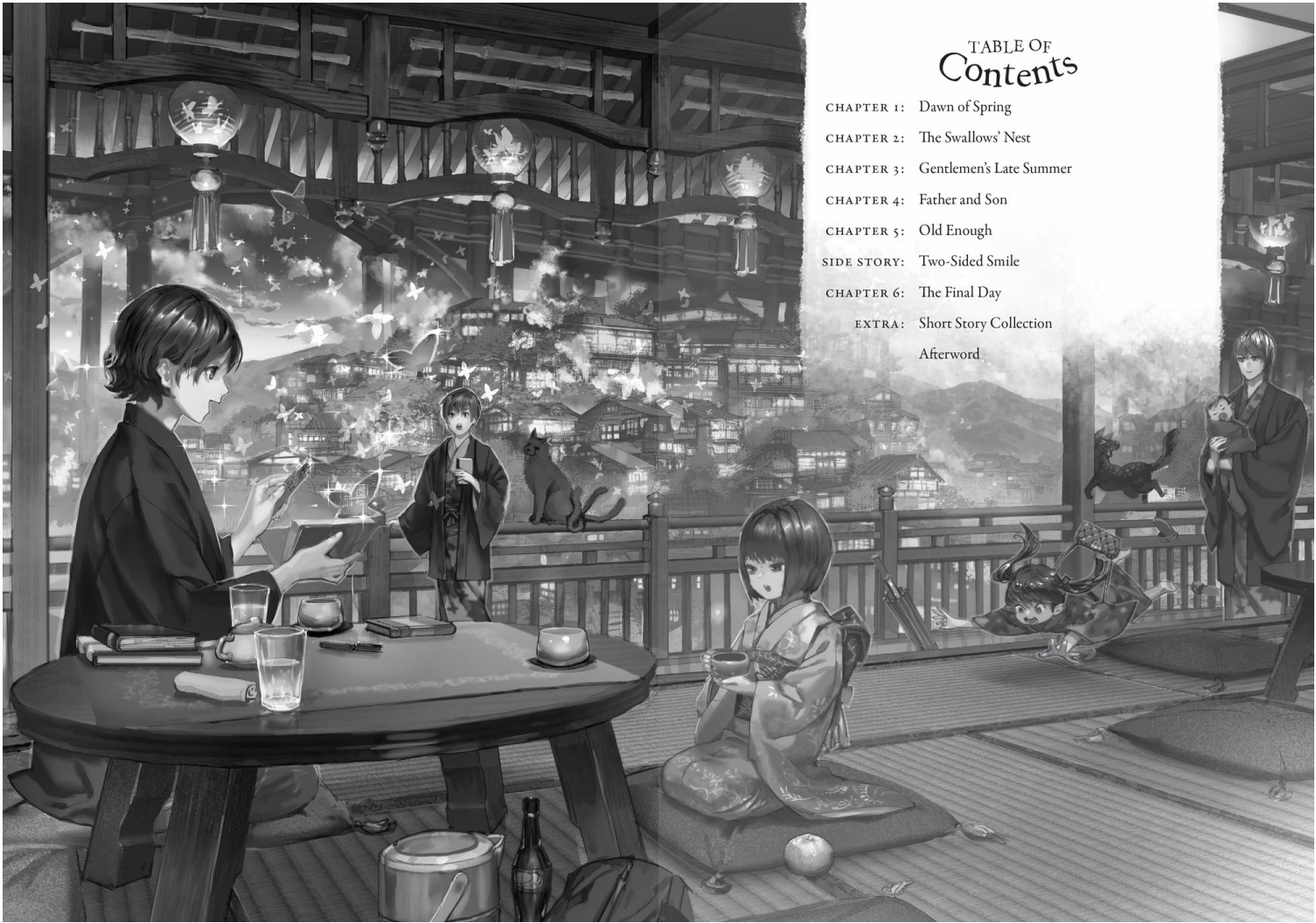


TABLE OF
Contents

CHAPTER 1: Dawn of Spring

CHAPTER 2: The Swallows' Nest

CHAPTER 3: Gentlemen's Late Summer

CHAPTER 4: Father and Son

CHAPTER 5: Old Enough

SIDE STORY: Two-Sided Smile

CHAPTER 6: The Final Day

EXTRA: Short Story Collection

Afterword

Chapter 1:

Dawn of Spring

I ENJOY CATCHING HINTS of change amid the monotony of daily life. In spring, I keep my eyes peeled for the moment the buds begin to open or the first glimpse of sprouts poking up through the snow. Each little discovery feels like a sign from the universe telling me to wake up and greet the new season, and I find myself standing a little taller with a flutter in my heart. And every time spring rolls back around, it happens all over again.

Of course, not all change is positive. It can evoke a medley of feelings, and because we humans are emotional creatures, we fight as hard as we can just to survive the torment of an ever-changing world. But we mustn't forget that humans are built to adapt. Over time, those visceral emotions—whether they're surprise or delight or pain or grief—all fade as we return to our everyday life.

Such is fate for every living being. After all, we can scarcely afford to fixate on a single change when each passing moment brings more and more of them. Indeed, no matter how painful any one event may be for us, it will gradually blend into the fabric of our lives, becoming nothing but a memory.

If you ask me, life is an endlessly repeating cycle of discovery, reaction, and adaptation. Each day, we walk upon a foundation of countless changes, and we call it maturity and experience. Naturally, I'm no exception.

A long time has passed since I lost my adoptive father Shinonome-san, the person I loved more than anyone in the whole world. I loved him so much that I couldn't imagine life without him. And yet, even in his absence, morning turns to night, winter turns to spring. Like a raging river, time flows on.

It's been three years since he left this world, and I know I'll never forget the grief, pain, and heartache I felt in that final moment. But I don't have time to reflect on the past. Today, in *this* moment, there are new changes taking root.

The calendar said spring had arrived quite some time ago, and yet the morning air still carried traces of winter. As I returned from dreamland, I let out a long breath. The room was freezing, and my nose was cold, but my bed was *torturously* warm and cozy. I could feel my better judgment fighting to hold its ground.

Uggghhh... I don't wanna get uuup...

I suspected the weather was partly to blame, but in any case, I'd been feeling perpetually drowsy lately. In all honesty, my eyelids were ready to throw in the towel.

It would be so nice to sleep in today...

I could hear the door of temptation swinging open...but if I gave in, I would only regret it. After all, today was the grand opening of the apothecary right next door to us. I couldn't possibly afford to oversleep!

Three years have passed since I married the love of my life, Suimei. Before today, he would commute to work from the bookstore where we lived. To be fair, it wasn't an especially long walk, but when our next-door neighbors moved away, the apothecary decided to take the opportunity to open a second location. Thanks to everyone raving about the former exorcist's highly effective concoctions, there were so many customers who came in specifically for Suimei's medicine that it was becoming too much for one store to handle.

Anyway, long story short: Suimei was promoted to store manager at the tender age of twenty-one! What wonderful news! I was so proud that you'd think the accomplishment was my own.

A lot had happened over the past three years. With no choice but to run the entire bookstore myself, I was completely overloaded, but Suimei was always there to support me. Sometimes he even handled tasks on my behalf. Thanks to him, I've managed without much trouble lately, and I couldn't be more grateful. That's why I was truly thrilled to see him succeed in his own career as well.

This will come as no surprise, but it took a ton of hard work to open a new store: planning, remodeling, ordering all the equipment and supplies necessary for the store to function, spreading the word to the regulars... As a result, I hadn't seen much of Suimei for a few months now. I knew it was beyond his

control, but I couldn't pretend that I didn't miss him like crazy. But starting today, I would get to see him every day! That alone was enough to put me on cloud nine.

The opening ceremony would take place this evening, and I was told we would be hosting a banquet for a large number of guests. That meant I didn't have time to lie around today, and I *especially* didn't have time to sleep in.

Rubbing my eyes, I yawned widely. Didn't I go to bed early last night? Why was I still so tired? *Guess I didn't get a deep enough sleep. Oh well...*

It felt like I might nod off the moment I let my guard down. The famous poet Mèng Hàorán once wrote, "In spring, sleep knows no dawn," but this was just ridiculous! Still, I couldn't just lie here and zone out all day. I needed to cook breakfast.

I'll just make something small for myself. No, wait...maybe I should make some onigiri too, as a snack for later. And after that... Ugh, there's just so much to do today!

Summoning all my willpower, I forced myself out of bed...and at that exact moment, something slid under the blanket to take over the newly vacated spot. Startled, I whirled around, and the black furball responded with a cloying mewl. It was Nyaa-san, the Kasha spirit and dear friend who had been there for me ever since I was a kid. The seduction of the warm bed had failed to corrupt me, but evidently it had worked on her just fine.

"Um, excuse you!" I protested. How was I supposed to fold up the blankets with her on them? She opened one eye to look at me, her ears twitching.

"You're seriously going to fold them away? And give up a perfectly warm bed? You must be out of your mind." She rolled onto her back, showing off her plump, fuzzy tummy. "C'mon, let's catch a few more Zs. They won't care if you sleep in. I'll even let you snuggle with me if it helps you get some real rest!"

It was truly a demonic temptation befitting of a black cat. *Nnnngghhh!* Holding back my inner turmoil, I returned her glare. "You know I can't do that! Don't you remember what day it is?!"

"Well, yeah."

“Then why?!”

“Look, don’t blame me, okay? I just thought you needed the sleep.” She fixed her mismatched eyes on mine. “Are you *sure* you don’t want to?”

“I’m getting up and that’s final!” I shouted, baffled by her insistence. She turned away with a scoff. Did she have her heart set on cuddling with me today or something? As always, her fickle nature was impossible to understand. “Good grief!”

I couldn’t afford to waste any more time dealing with her, so I’d just have to fold the blankets later. Pulling on my wool cardigan, I slipped out of the room... and as soon as I set foot on the hallway floor, the chill sent goosebumps pricking up my arms. Biting back a shriek, I hopped from one foot to the other all the way back to the bedroom.

“Cold, cold, cold!” In a flash, I brought my winter clothes right back out of retirement. Once I was bundled up, I let out a sigh of relief.

Guess I can’t handle the cold like I used to... It was never this bad before...

I felt so silly having to wear multiple layers just to walk around inside the house. In my teens, I’d been invincible; whether it was too hot or too cold, I could endure it through sheer willpower. But look at me now...

When I was in school, Noname was always warning me that “girls need to stay warm!” At the time, with my teenage rebellion in full swing, I wrote it off as paranoid nagging...but now I understood. She was right: A woman’s greatest enemy was the cold. And it would take everything I had to fight it off.

If it was this bad in my mid-twenties, what would it be like in my thirties? Or my forties? Or beyond that?

“Nnnnn...!” I quivered in fear.

Gah, I don’t have time to stand around! Snapping back to my senses, I hurried down to the first floor, my footsteps playing a melodic tune on the stairs as I went.

The deserted living room was still and silent, as if time itself had stopped entirely. I glanced over at the bedroom next door. Bereft of an occupant, it had

been reduced to little more than cold, empty space.

Exhaling, I approached the tightly closed window shutters. With a little force, the ill-fitting fixture swung open, and the morning air came streaming in. My breath turned to fog as the crisp chill purified my lungs.

I shook the drowsiness away with a good stretch. Beyond the window, yet another crystal-clear sky hung above, dotted with stars. In a world of perpetual night, the sun would never rise.

Just then, something sparkly fluttered past my nose and scattered its glowing light: a glimmerfly. This human-loving creature must have been drawn to my presence. It circled me for a moment, then perched on my finger.

“Morning. Another cold day, huh?” I said to it on a whim. It gently flapped its wings before abruptly taking to the air once more. “Awww...” Disappointed, I watched it go.

Up in the sky, a flock of onmoraki passed overhead, their big wings and long necks gracefully outstretched. According to an ancient Chinese text called the *Qing Zun Lu*, these bird spirits were created from corpses at the exact moment when the soul left the body. They looked like black cranes at first glance, and they were known for their glowing lantern eyes that streaked like shooting stars when they flew.

“Wow!” A smile spread across my face. To a resident of the spirit realm, an onmoraki sighting was a lucky omen. Like bush warblers in the human world, these birds were considered a herald of springtime.

In the distance, I could faintly hear the town stirring awake. After long and sleepy winters, the streets of the spirit realm came back to life in the spring. Spirits who had spent the past few months hibernating would return in droves, their wallets in hand, feasting and shopping to their hearts’ content. For a bookstore, this was moneymaking season!

“Heh heh heh... I’m gonna buy so many new releases,” I muttered with a grin.

But then I pictured Suimei’s reaction: “*Don’t splurge on things without budgeting first, you idiot,*” he’d say with a vicious scowl. The thought made my childish glee wither instantly. I had the tendency to go overboard when it came

to books, so he always kept me in check.

Oh well. Not like I have time for that today! I clapped my hands to my cheeks. “All right, let’s get to work!”

But right as I turned away from the window, I heard something rather concerning behind me...

THUMP, THUMP...THUMPTHUMPTHUMPTHUMP!!!

“Wh-what in the world?!”

Naturally, I whirled around...but what I saw next brought me to a total standstill.

A large pile of edible wild plants from the mountains had appeared in one quarter of the yard: big, girthy bamboo shoots; water dropwort still wet with morning dew; cow parsley with gleaming green leaves; angelica-tree shoots; and even some fiddleheads from bracken ferns and ostrich ferns. It was a veritable springtime feast! I could smell the earthy freshness all the way from where I stood.

“Wait, but...what...?!” There’s just so much! Can we eat all that before it goes bad...? Gah, no, that’s not the issue here!

As I was working myself into a tizzy trying to understand what had just happened, a cheerful voice called out from above. “Morning, Kaori! Nice weather we’re having!”

I looked up and spotted a man standing on the roof next door, his slender build concealed beneath a thin knit sweater and some slacks. He wore pointed-toe dress shoes supposedly made with real Italian leather. Sprouting from his back were two large black wings, and he put on a charming smile as he fluttered down to the ground. Those thin wire-frame glasses of his really did suit him. His shaggy jet-black hair rustled in the breeze.

“Morning, Kinme.”

At my greeting, the raven Tengu grinned back at me, his pale eyes twinkling.

Three years had passed since I inherited the bookstore. As a spirit, Kinme’s appearance hadn’t changed much since then, but his taste in clothing and

overall vibe seemed more mature somehow.

“Opening day at last, huh? Congrats.”

“Thanks, but this is Suimei’s achievement, not mine! Anyway, uh...what’s with the veggies?”

“Oh, just a little celebratory gift. Sorry to dump them on you like that.”

“You’d better be! You almost gave me a heart attack with that huge pile raining down out of nowhere!”

“Half of it is from me, and the other half is from...er, Yamakakachi. When she heard Suimei was opening his own branch, she went hog-wild and insisted I take it all.”

“Oh...uh...I see...”

Yamakakachi was a mountain goddess who lived in Mie Prefecture’s Otogitoge Pass. Though she took the form of a giant snake, she was an eccentric who enjoyed books and modern fashion. As such, she was one of our best clients...and, as it happened, she was a sucker for handsome men, with Suimei being her favorite. That said, she loathed women with a violent passion, and I’d been uncomfortable around her ever since that time she nearly killed me.

“Has she been treating you well?” I asked, feeling a tiny bit conflicted.

“Sure has,” Kinme nodded casually. “I doubt I could’ve tracked down all those mountain spirits without her help. Plus, she’s introduced me to a lot of deities. And then I can talk to her retainers and other unique regional spirits... Oh yeah, take this before I forget.” He opened his briefcase and pulled out a thick envelope. “My current draft for the next *Selected Memoirs from the Spirit Realm*. It’s only halfway done, though.”

“Thank you so much! You always amaze me, Kinme. You’ve really made great progress...unlike a *certain someone* who’s missed every deadline he’s ever been given!”

As I giggled, Kinme grinned bashfully. “Nah, this is nothing. Way too early to go comparing me to Shinonome. There’s still so much I don’t know... I’ve barely scratched the surface.”

“Aww, I’m sure you’ll get there!”

“I don’t know... Each page I finish drives home just how incredible Shinonome was...and how painfully inexperienced I am. Guess I really gotta apply myself!” His tone was lighthearted, but I was surprised to hear him being so hard on himself. He smiled dryly as he gazed off into the distance. “Y’know, I’m still new to this, and I’ve made my share of mistakes, but...I’m glad I have the opportunity to learn. It’s fun.” His gaze softened. “And it turns out...the outside world isn’t so bad,” he finished wistfully.

The old Kinme never would have felt this way, but I could tell he meant it now, and it warmed my heart. “I’m so glad I asked you to take over his series.” *You’ve really grown up, old friend.*

With Tamaki-san’s help, Shinonome-san had published two volumes of *Selected Memoirs*. After he passed, I decided I would continue the series until he reincarnated, but I didn’t have a clue who should actually *write* them. I was no wordsmith myself, nor was I familiar with the interview process. But then Noname recommended Kinme. After all, he was a keen observer and a skilled communicator when he needed to be. He was hesitant at first, but he eventually came around to the idea of writing, and now he spent his days traveling across Japan to interview all sorts of spirits.

In the past, Kinme used to think his world was complete with just Ginme in it. Back then, I never would’ve dreamed that just a few years later, I’d be watching his world expand with each passing day. *Is this what it means to be an adult?* Kinme was like a brother to me, and I couldn’t help but feel sentimental about how he’d changed. Generally speaking, spirits didn’t age visibly, and yet I could see it all the same.

I clutched the stack of papers tightly with both hands. “I’ll file this away for now. Looking forward to the second half!”

“You can count on it,” he replied with a sheepish grin. “Oh, I almost forgot. Any second now...”

Suddenly his gaze turned upward, and when I followed suit...I screamed. With a deafening *BOOM*, someone landed right in front of us.

“Hey, Kaori!” he shouted, flashing his pearly whites and giving a peace sign.

“I’m here! Sorry I took so long!”

It was Kinme’s twin brother, Ginme. His hair had grown long and messy, and he was covered in scrapes. His tanned skin only enhanced the brightness of his teeth. In addition to the holes in his black garb, the animal furs he wore lent him a wild, beastly vibe. On his back he carried a spear and a giant boar caught in a net.

“Brought ya a souvenir! Meat’s on the menu tonight!” With a carefree grin, he casually hoisted up what had to be a six-hundred-pound boar with one hand.

“Th-*that’s* my souvenir?! What, you expect me to roast the whole thing...?!” I’d been worried enough about managing the vegetables. Now it *really* looked like this food would go to waste! A sense of dread began to quietly set in. *There’s no way we’ll have room in the freezer for all this! I’ll have to share it with the whole neighborhood!*

“For crying out loud, Ginme! Don’t you think that’s too much? They’re not gonna know what to do with a kill that size,” Kinme sighed.

“Awww, really? Size is king, if ya ask me! They always say that too big’s better than too little! Besides, *you* brought her all those veggies, right? Pot, meet kettle!”

“True, but... Ow! HEY! Don’t hit me so hard! Control your strength, damn it!”

“Wa ha ha ha! Sorry, my bad...”

Just like that, the twins were back to their usual shenanigans. Now that I thought about it, it had been quite some time since I last saw them together. A few years ago they’d been inseparable, like mirror reflections, but now they were walking their own paths.

Unlike Kinme, who had gradually drifted away from training in pursuit of writing, Ginme was doing his best to become a full-fledged Tengu. He spent his days challenging the strongest fighters in each Tengu clan across Japan. Put nicely, he was a free spirit—or, less charitably, a loose cannon—but he still seemed to be winning favor with all the most powerful spirits and learning a lot from them. Lately, he’d started boasting openly that he was going to be “the most fearsome Great Tengu of all,” and now he had the experience to back it

up. Not only that, but the stronger he got, the wilder his antics became... Looking at the ridiculously oversized boar, I forced a laugh, then let out a sigh.

All that aside, I'd known Ginme since he was a baby chick, so I was proud to see that he was changing. *And it's such a good change for him too.*

"Thanks for the souvenir, Ginme. Could you help me carry it? I'll have the butcher carve it," I said.

"Huh? Why not just do it here?" he asked. "You could save money if you just ask Noname. We always used to do it over by the well, didn't we? And you've got the tools for it, so... Heck, *I* could probably do it if ya want!"

"I know, but..." Sheepishly, I scratched my cheek. "Lately it's been kinda hard for me to stomach the smell of blood. It tends to *linger*, you know? Makes me nauseated, so..."

"Really? Huh..."

"First I'm hearing of this."

The twins exchanged a glance.

"I guess I must be getting older," I continued. "Some things I used to be able to handle are just too much for me now."

I slumped my shoulders. I thought getting older meant I'd be able to do *more*, not less! These days I could barely bring myself to fillet a fish! It drove me crazy, watching my comfort zone shift beyond my control. *If my body's going to change, I'd at least like it to be a good change, dang it!*

But while I was feeling sorry for myself, I realized the twins were looking at me curiously. Almost like they had a question on their minds...

Just then, a voice called out from the living room. "Oh my! It looks like everyone's early but me!"

I looked over my shoulder and smiled when I spotted a familiar, glamorous face. "Morning, Noname."

"Good morning, you three!" She combed a hand through her hair and shot us a playful wink.

The Tengu twins weren't the only ones who had changed over these past few years. The biggest differences about Noname were her hairstyle and her fashion sense. Her lush green hair, which used to cascade all the way to her waist, was now trimmed short, and her makeup was more conservative. Instead of feminine garb, she favored the *ao gam*, a brocade tunic traditionally worn by men. And while she'd presented as a beautiful woman before, now she could pass as a handsome Asian man.

This change took place soon after Shinonome-san passed away. In Noname's own words, she felt obligated to be "both a mother *and* a father from now on." Really, that was just the sort of person she was. Personally, I didn't think she needed to go that far. But from the perspective of someone who had poured her heart and soul into being a mom for me, evidently it was nonnegotiable.

These days she was more passionate than ever, insisting I depend on her "enough for both me and Shinonome!" But, speaking as a grown, married adult, I didn't really know how to react to this. I was grateful, of course, but part of me still wanted her to let me find my own way.

That said, I enjoyed seeing her with short hair for a change...and apparently, I wasn't the only one. The apothecary customers, particularly the women, adored it. She was sexy in a different way, like a man of mystery from a mafia movie.

But as soon as she laid eyes on the mess, she started ranting at the twins. "Good heavens, look at the yard! Did we need all these veggies? And a whole *boar*?! There's so much! Listen here, you two. I know today's a special day and all, but could you dial it down a notch or ten?!"

"Aww, c'mon! It's a special day for Kaori and Suimei, so I thought, y'know...!"

"Yeah, what he said! Kaori's our old friend, and Suimei's our buddy too!"

They both grinned, unrepentant. Noname let out a sigh. "Good grief... Well, we need to prep it for cooking, and you two are going to help. Ugh, there's so much to do today..." She cracked her neck as she barked orders. However, despite her words, she didn't actually seem that upset.

"Wait, I'll help too!" I piped up. "I just need to make breakfast real quick..."

“No.”

“Huhwha?” She shot me down so fast that I stumbled on my words in surprise. Even the twins looked puzzled. “How come? Even I can handle...”

“No, you can’t.” She marched over and reached out to me. The look on her face was...conflicted.

“N-Noname...?”

“Quiet down and hold still for a moment.”

Her slender, supple, yet firmly masculine fingers grazed my cheek. Her hand was so cold that I couldn’t help but flinch when she touched my neck. She was... checking my pulse? She averted her eyes, as though she were deep in thought. Then her hand moved to my forehead, and she let out a breath.

“Wh-what is it?” I asked nervously. She was acting strangely...and her next words were even stranger.

“Has an unfamiliar spirit paid a visit here recently? Within the past...I don’t know...couple of months?”

“Uhhh...no...? Why do you ask?”

Was a rogue spirit causing trouble again? This realm was home to *a lot* of hotheaded types, many of whom acted on instinct like animals and lashed out violently in pursuit of their desires. I hadn’t heard any rumors about spirits in conflict lately, so I thought all was well, but perhaps that was also changing. As I waited anxiously for her answer, she chuckled.

“It’s nothing, dear. No big deal if you haven’t seen him. But let me know if a spirit you don’t recognize happens to stop by, okay? Just for my reference.”

“Uhhh...okay.”

At my assent, Noname seemed to return to her usual self. With a smile, she ruffled my hair. “Anyway, back on topic! That ridiculous amount of food is obviously going to be too much for you. Just leave it to us. In the meantime, why don’t you head over to the apothecary?”

“Which one?”

“Why, Suimei’s, of course!”

“Wait...Suimei’s back already?!” My face lit up. *I thought he was coming home closer to lunchtime! Did he finish ahead of schedule?*

She nodded. “He got back early this morning. Apparently, he was traveling all over the place picking up ingredients for medicine, and he looked *dead* tired, the poor thing. Probably didn’t have the energy to come all the way home to see you.” Then her eyes took on a mischievous glint, and she leaned close to whisper in my ear. “Why don’t you go take him some breakfast? I think he’d like that.”

“Oh, okay then!” *Eeeee! I finally get to see him again!* The sheer excitement drove the uncertainty from my mind. “I’ll go whip something up!”

Racing into the house, I grabbed my apron. I needed something tasty *and* quick to make...a breakfast food that Suimei was sure to love... My heart raced as I passed through the living room into the kitchen.

“Hey, Noname! What was *that* about?!”

“You’ve got me curious, damn it! What’s the story? If there’s gonna be a fight, I want in!”

At the sound of the twins’ voices, I turned around to look. Back in the yard, Noname was standing there with what seemed like a knowing grin on her face while the two Tengu badgered her.

“Don’t be silly,” she told them. “It’s nothing so crude as a fight. You’ll find out before long... Ooh, it’s going to get *sooo* busy around here...”

Today’s breakfast: seasoned omelets made with anchovies and green onions, plain salted onigiri, grilled sardines, pickled veggies, and, of course, two steaming bowls of miso soup with extra seaweed. I put a lot of effort into cooking it, but somehow the meal still didn’t feel special enough. *Maybe I should have spent more time on it.* Then again, we were going to have a big dinner later that night to celebrate the new store, so maybe this was just right...

Even though I wasn’t totally satisfied, I decided to accept it as good enough. I

placed each dish on a tray, then carried it outside and walked behind the house next door to the back entrance. Since it wasn't open for business yet, the front door was still locked.

“Coming in...!”

The rusty hinges let out a creak as I slowly pushed open the old, weathered door. I was met with an instant flurry of smells: bitter, sweet, acidic. The unmistakable tang of medicinal herbs. The rich earthy scent of a forest. The fragrance of freshly cut wood.

The back entrance was surrounded by mountains of boxes, making it hard to see inside. Struggling not to spill any of the food, I kept walking while taking in my surroundings.

“Wow... So this is what it looks like in here...” I stopped short in awe. I'd seen glimpses here and there while it was still under construction, but this was my first real look at the finished result.

The stars twinkled down at me through the glass ceiling. Above the first floor was a mezzanine with dozens of medicine cabinets lining the walls, each with rows upon rows of little square drawers in staggering numbers. Hanging pendant lights filled with glimmerflies lit up the bottles of ingredients and drying herbs. In contrast to Nona's store and its glamorous Chinese aesthetic, this one was constructed with a focus on wood tones: spartan and austere, just like its designer.

Not only was Suimei planning to offer made-to-order medicine, he told me he wanted to have some premade treatments in stock at all times. This section was located in one corner of the first floor. It was clearly still a work in process, however, seeing as the large table was piled high with medicines that had yet to be packaged for sale.

“Oh... There he is...”

A smile crept onto my face as I found the very man I was seeking. Inching up to the table, I quietly set the tray down on an empty spot. He was sleeping face down on the table, and he hadn't even bothered to change into pajamas first. His white button-up was riddled with wrinkles, his unevenly rolled sleeves were faintly dirty, his slacks and suspenders were all dusty, and his leather shoes had

dulled. It was patently obvious just how exhausted he was.

“Nnn...” As he groaned, his snow-white hair spilled sideways, and his long lashes fluttered. Maybe he was dreaming about something.

Those sure are some dark circles under his eyes. I bet he’s been giving up sleep to get his work done... Gently, I reached out and combed the hair away from his face.

“Who’s there?!”

In the next instant, he was gripping me tightly by the wrist. His sharp glare made my heart skip a beat...but then he realized it was me and lowered his guard once more. His brown eyes took on a hint of honey sweetness as he frowned.

“Did I doze off? Sorry. I was planning to come into the house once you were awake.”

“Well, good morning, sleepyhead! Maybe you should’ve come straight home instead of stopping by the store.”

“I didn’t want to wake anyone up.”

“That’s sweet of you, but you don’t have to be so considerate all the time. We’re family, remember?”

“*You* may feel that way, but I guarantee that black cat would throw a fit.”

“Oh... Yaaaah, you’ve got a point. Hee hee!” My furry best friend could get pretty hostile if anyone disturbed her beauty sleep.

As I giggled, Suimei sat upright, stretching with a groan. My heart fluttered. We’d first met when he was seventeen years old—three years younger than me, and shorter than me too. He was rude and unfriendly, and I remember how his frail body had only magnified his air of boyish innocence. But at some point, he had surpassed me in height, and he became muscular, with broad shoulders and brawny arms. He wasn’t as beefy as Ginme, of course, but he was strong and masculine all the same...and yet it was the long hair cascading from his neckline that I found irresistibly sexy.

He used to be such a fragile prince, but now he’s all grown up. Wow... I bet

everybody stares at him when he walks down the street in the human world...

I wasn't sure I liked the thought of that, but I wished he'd take me with him just once so I could see for myself. We wouldn't even have to do anything in particular! I just wanted to watch how he reacted to all the attention. It'd probably be hilarious.

Yeah, I definitely gotta try it sometime...

"Hey!"

"Mmggh?!" As I was plotting, he suddenly reached out and pinched my cheek.

"You're getting another one of your weird ideas, aren't you?"

"Gah! How did you...?!"

"I know how your mind works."

He fixed me with a withering stare, and I laughed nervously. "Don't be silly! You can't possibly know what I was just imagining...c-can you?! Because if it turns out you can, I think I might die!"

"Wh...what the hell were you fantasizing about, for God's sake?!"

He looked completely horrified. I could tell this was about to turn into an interrogation, so I put on my most innocent smile. "I...I wasn't *fantasizing*, silly! Wh-why don't you have some breakfast? I made it just for you!"

"...You're too cheeky for your own good."

"Aren't I always?"

"Yes. Yes, you are."

"Awww. Now that we've been married for three years, it feels like you really get me."

"Of course I do."

We shared a laugh as we gazed at each other. Then he began to clear a space on the table, and I started setting out all the breakfast dishes.

"Where's Kuro?" I asked.

"Sleeping upstairs."

“I’m sort of impressed that he can sleep through us goofing off down here.”

“It’s how he’s always been, and it’s how he’ll always be.”

“Yeah...”

Sitting side by side, we pressed our hands together to say grace before digging in. Suimei took a sip of miso soup and visibly relaxed. “This is good.”

“Sorry it’s kinda boring. It’s been forever since we last ate together, so I wanted to make something special, but...instead it just feels like any other day, huh?”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t bother me. They call it *comfort* food for a reason, after all.” Then he paused to look at me for a moment. “I always love eating your cooking, no matter what you make.”

“...Oh...o-okay...”

My cheeks flared as I averted my eyes. It looked like Mr. Highest-Quality Organic Rice had changed his tune since we first met. Even worse, he wasn’t trying to be romantic on purpose—it just came to him *naturally*. It scared me to think he might accidentally seduce someone else one of these days.

Hesitantly, I glanced over at him. He was quietly eating his meal, and though he didn’t let it show on his face, I could sense that he was in a good mood. He clearly meant every word he said.

Ugh, this man drives me crazy! I can’t explain how or why, but...he just does! But as I wrestled with the burning, itching, restless feeling in my chest, I suddenly realized he was looking at me with concern. “Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Well, I noticed you’re not eating. Aren’t you hungry?”

Unlike Suimei, who had practically cleaned his plate already, I’d barely eaten a third of my portion. “Oh, uh...no, I think I’m full.”

“Feeling sick?”

Not sure how to explain it, I scratched my cheek with a sheepish smile. “Well, it’s just... Lately I’ve noticed I start to feel gross if I eat too much.”

Specifically, I would get terrible heartburn, as if something were lodged in my

chest...and, truth be told, I was already feeling it right now. It took just a few bites to make my stomach upset. That said, it didn't happen at every single meal, so there were probably other things going on that I didn't know about.

"Oh, but to be clear, it's not like I *can't eat* or anythi... Whoa!"

Out of nowhere, Suimei grabbed my arm with a stern look on his face. He touched my forehead and then my neck before letting out a sigh. "You've got a fever. If you're feeling sick, you should go back to bed."

"Don't be silly! It's not *that* bad!"

"...Kaori, you have the biggest appetite of anyone I know. So if you're not finishing your food, something's wrong."

"Hey, come on! That's a little harsh!" *You make me sound like a pig!*

He took one glance at my teary eyes and heaved a deep sigh. "Look...I was having a dream just now."

"What about?"

"Shinonome. He was chewing me out, telling me to spend more time with you and pay more attention."

"No way! Really?"

"Really. To be honest, he totally tore into me... He clearly didn't like how swamped I've been lately." As Suimei described it, Shinonome-san had a bottle of liquor in one hand and a ferocious glare in his eyes. No wonder the dream had left such an impression on him. Then he reached out and gently cupped my cheek in his hand. "Just don't tire yourself out too much. If anything should happen to you... The thought alone scares me."

Framed by hazy white lashes, his eyes shimmered with anxiety. As a young child, he'd lost the one person he could turn to—his mother—and I could imagine he was terrified of the same thing happening again.

"Okay. Sorry for worrying you." Just because I wasn't literally bedridden didn't mean it was smart for me to ignore my body's needs. My late father must have been worried for me too, since he was hassling my husband in his sleep. "I *did* promise Shinonome-san I'd keep the store going until he gets back, and I can't

do that if I neglect my health, so I'd better take it easy today. Thanks for thinking of me, and sorry I can't help out on your special day."

"Don't worry about it. I mean, we're not exactly short-handed. I'm sure Noname will take care of everything in no time."

"Are you sure we should just sit back and let her deal with it?"

"Trust me, she's more excited than I am, and that's saying something. She planned out the whole ceremony, the food, the drinks... There's really nothing left for us to do."

"Ha ha ha ha! Sounds like her, all right!"

"See? There's nothing to worry about."

"Yeah, I guess not."

"Why don't I get you some meds? Or we could take you to see a doctor in the human world."

"I don't know if I really need medicine... Any chance you could make it a little less bitter...?"

"No promises."

"Ugh! Meanie!"

Sitting shoulder to shoulder, we laughed. My heart felt warm and toasty. Was there anything more sacred in life than the privilege of having someone around to worry and look out for me?

My mind drifted to the familiar weight wrapped around my left ring finger. With my father looking on from the crowd, we'd vowed on this ring to cherish each other. Objectively it was just a piece of metal, and yet...the love it carried was always with me.

I'm so glad I married you, Suimei. Just by being here, you give me the strength to keep going.

Just then, I sucked in a breath. An icy shiver ran down my spine, and goosebumps broke out across my entire body.

"What's going on?!" Suimei shouted. He must have felt it too.

We leapt to our feet and looked around...and that was when I noticed a strange presence in the room with us, dimly illuminated by the faint light of the glimmerflies.

The intruder looked like both a child and an adult simultaneously. His head was large, but the furry body beneath the dirty rags he wore was that of an infant's. His nose and mouth resembled a cow's, and greasy hair clung to his blank, expressionless face. As he hunched over, his eyes bulged like a frog's, looking fearfully at us.

"Who are you?" Suimei asked cautiously.

Cradling a bundle of yellowing cloth, the creature looked to each side, then answered in a quiet, hoarse voice: "I am Kekke..."

"Kekke?" I repeated. The name didn't ring a bell. Maybe Shinonome-san would have recognized it, but I was no spirit expert, so I didn't have a clue.

Suimei, however, was a different story. His eyes narrowed in contemplation.

With slow, sticky footsteps, Kekke began to approach us, and I hastily swallowed a scream. "K-Kekke-san? Wh-what do you need from us? If you're looking for medicine, I'm sorry, but..."

Regardless of his intentions, this creature was trespassing. Except perhaps for Nurarihyon, we couldn't have spirits barging into the store before it was open, so I needed to take a hard-line stance. But right as I summoned my resolve, I heard a buzzing sound whizz past my ear.

Was that...?

Looking more closely at Kekke, I realized he was covered in flies.

Euggghhh! A shudder of disgust ran through me, and I instinctively took a step back. My butt bumped into the table behind me, causing a loud screech, and Kekke narrowed his eyes into slits.

"Will you be our mater?"

As he hurled this unfamiliar word at me, his form began to swell. Then something slithered out of the bundle in his arms.

Hands. Babies' hands, soaked in blood...a mass of them linked together like

tentacles, writhing in search of something. They surged toward me as if in a rage.

“What the...wh...AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!”

The tightly grouped hands moved in segments, like a caterpillar. No offense to Kekke, but it was viscerally nauseating for me.

Even though I’d screamed and thrown my arms around him, my husband didn’t move an inch to protect me. As a former exorcist, this was rather out of character for him. Normally he’d reach for a paper talisman at the slightest hint of a threat, but this time he just stood there, motionless. Meanwhile, the innumerable baby hands were steadily closing in. There was nothing I could do but squeeze my eyes shut...

“...?”

I braced myself for impact, but...nothing touched me. Timidly, I opened my eyes. The baby hands were right there in front of me.

I choked back another scream. Out of sheer terror, my legs gave out, and I dropped into a sitting position on the floor in front of the mass of hands. Then it crawled forward, and...touched my finger.

“Huh...?”

Its grip was weak, hesitant...the trademark dewy grasp of a baby. It didn’t seem to want anything more from me. I stared down at it in shock until it eventually melted away into thin air.

“Ah, good,” Kekke muttered. In a blink, he was cradling the bundle of cloth once more. I could see something wriggling inside, probably those baby hands. He stroked them lovingly through the fabric, his eyes brimming with affection.

Wh...what just happened...? My heart was jackhammering in my chest. What did Kekke want from me? And what did “mater” mean, anyway?

“Uh...” I tried to speak up, but the words wouldn’t come...and as I sat there in silence, he turned to leave.

“I go home now. And you...make sure you shower him with love. Please.”

With those final words, Kekke waddled off, sticky steps echoing across the

floor. Speechless, I could only watch with my mouth agape as he disappeared into the darkness.

“Who’s ‘him’...?”

I didn’t understand a single bit of what had just happened. All I knew was that the threat was gone. Right as I heaved a sigh of relief, a wild clatter arose at the back entrance.

“Uh, hello?! I heard a scream! What’s going on in here?!” Noname came rushing into the building, white as a sheet, followed by the twins. Even Nyaa-san was with them.

A furious Ginme charged up to Suimei. “Poor Kaori looks like she’s seen a damn ghost! Where were you, man?!”

And so, my husband told everyone about the strange spirit we had just encountered while I cradled Nyaa-san on my lap. It was taking everything I had just to regain my composure. “It was so scary...”

“I assume you got yourself into trouble again? Good grief. You’re always getting involved with weirdos.”

“Not on purpose!”

Her words were harsh, but the fact that she was letting me hug her was proof enough of her tender heart.

“Explain it to me so I understand! When that...whatever it’s called...spirit showed up, did you do your job as her husband?! Unlike you, *she* has no way to defend herself! Look how scared she is! How can you call yourself her protector?!”

Startled to hear Ginme shouting, I whipped my head up and saw him grabbing Suimei by the collar. One wrong move and this situation was liable to explode.

“...He had no hostile intent, so it was fine.”

“That’s not the problem, damn it! The problem is that he *scared her*! You’re the one who vowed to keep her safe! You promised me! You promised Shinonome!”

At this, Suimei fell silent with a scowl. But before Ginme could press him

further, Kinme cut in between them. “Now, now, that’s enough!” he insisted, pushing his twin brother back.

But the more I listened, the more I started to wonder the same thing. We’d been faced with an unknown spirit. Why would a former exorcist, one with formal training in spirit combat, simply stand there and let it do whatever it wanted?

Then Suimei looked at me, and my heart skipped a beat. The look in his eyes told me he was...wavering about something. *What’s going on?* Then an idea flashed through my mind. *Am I not worth protecting? Is he just that sick of me?*

The blood drained from my face. Had he lost interest in me? Or...was there another woman?! Did something happen while he was getting the new store ready? He’d been away from home for quite a while... What if he was approached by a stone-cold stunner with big boobs and a tiny waist?!

Ugh, no! I don’t wanna think about it! My train of thought spun in circles while my mind played songs about love triangles. *“Now she’s leading him on, and she’ll lay him right down...” Gah, no one’s going to get a reference that ancient!* Then, while I was quaking over a figment of my imagination, Noname put a hand on my shoulder.

“N-Noname...” Teary-eyed, I looked up at her...but her expression caught me completely off guard.

“Heh heh heh heh heh heh...” She was grinning from ear to ear. With her cheeks flushed and her amber eyes twinkling, she could only be described as... joyful?

“Wh-what’s got *you* in such a good mood?” I asked, puzzled. *Sorry, but whatever it is, now’s not the time! I’m in the middle of an adultery crisis here!*

Just then, she suddenly pulled me into a tight hug. “Congratulations, Kaori! I had my suspicions, of course, but it looks like I was right!”

“Come again?!” *Congratulations for what?! My husband leaving me?!*

But as I racked my brain for the answer, I heard Suimei sigh. “Noname, is Kekke...?”

“Yes, that’s right! A visit from Kekke is an omen. A herald of change.”

“...Then I was right.” He looked directly into Ginme’s eyes, smoothed the wrinkles at his shirt collar, and then gave him a firm pat on the arm. “Look, I feel bad that she was frightened, but it was necessary. I did nothing wrong.”

“‘Scuse me?! *Explain* what’s going on here, damn it!” Ginme’s veins bulged as he snapped back.

Suimei responded with a smirk. “Kaori, you’d definitely better take it easy today, all right?”

“Uh, o-okay... I don’t mind, but...”

“Make sure you rest up, because we’re going to see a doctor in the human world tomorrow. I’m sure Toochika has connections to at least one.”

“Wait, but...I mean, do I really *need* to see a doctor about this...?”

“YES!” Suimei and Noname shouted back in unison.

“Eek!” I shrank back in alarm. When I looked up at them, I was met with their intense glares, and my face stiffened. “Uh, guys? What’s wrong? You’re scaring me.”

My grip on Nyaa-san tightened. The two of them exchanged a glance, then shrugged in exasperation.

“Real talk, hon, I have no clue how you’ve lasted this long without figuring it out,” said Noname. “Should we be worried about how oblivious you are? I mean, it’s *your* body. Don’t you pay attention?”

“This is Kaori we’re talking about,” said Suimei. “Unless it involves books, it doesn’t even register to her. Carefree with a capital C.”

“Oh, that’s so true! Like father, like daughter!”

“Why’s everybody roasting me all of a sudden?!” I slumped my shoulders.

Suimei chuckled dryly and stroked my hair. “Because you’re a hopeless mess.”

I scowled, pouting my lips. He was treating me like a little kid!

“Fine, I’ll explain it,” he conceded in a chiding tone. “The spirit we met is called a Kekke in Nagano, or a Kekkai in Saitama and Kanagawa. It’s best known

for appearing during childbirth.”

“*Childbirth?* I haven’t heard about any new babies lately.”

“Yes, the last one was Otoyo’s child four years ago. Pretty sure there haven’t been any since then.” He exhaled slightly, fixing his gaze on me as he continued. “A Kekke is born from the hearts of babies who didn’t survive. In the past, when medical knowledge was limited, deformed babies were seen as abominations. They were buried under the floorboards like a dirty secret, and no one mourned them.

The moment a Kekke was born, they were said to climb up the pothook or dash under the porch. In Kanagawa Prefecture, people would hang a ladle from the hook in advance to strike at any Kekke who climbed it. Imagine how those lost babies must have felt, never making it into the world, never even being given a memorial service... Thus, whenever a Kekke appeared in the spirit realm, they brought those babies’ feelings straight to—you guessed it—someone harboring a tiny new life inside them.

“A Kekke entrusts the regrets of the lost children to a new mother to help their spirits pass on. They only appear before someone who is pregnant, so it’s no surprise you three didn’t know about it. But the apothecary customers talk about it from time to time.”

“Oh...I-I see...”

I knew Suimei was doing his best to explain it to me, but, honestly, most of it was going in one ear and out the other. I mean, he made it sound like I...

“I’m...pregnant...?” I murmured.

His eyes softened, and he squeezed my hand. “Yeah. You were visited by a Kekke, so there’s no doubt about it. Congrats, Kaori.”

I’m seriously pregnant? With Suimei’s baby? My jaw dropped.

“Holy crap,” Kinme murmured.

“Whoaaa! Way to go, Kaori!” Ginme exclaimed.

I shot them a nervous smile, then looked down at my best friend sitting in my lap. Her gaze met mine. “Oh, give me a break! You only just now realized it?”

She gave me a withered look with her mismatched eyes, her ears twitching restlessly.

“You knew?!”

“Of course I did! You smell different, and you’re feverish. Plus, when humans get pregnant, their sense of taste changes, and they get incredibly sensitive to strong smells, right? That fits all your symptoms to a T!”

I thought I was just getting older! I was so stunned that I was starting to feel lightheaded.

“That’s why I invited you to snooze with me,” she shrugged. As I was reeling, she hopped out of my arms and onto the table, where she swished her three tails. “Congratulations, Kaori. Now it’s your turn to be a mother, just like Akiho before you.”

The sound of my late mother’s name made my eyes burn. “S-Suimei...” I called, my heart pounding. My voice threatened to waver, but I spilled my heart anyway. “I’m happy, but...at the same time, I’m kinda scared.”

I put a hand to my belly, but I couldn’t even feel a bump. Was there really a baby growing inside me? It just didn’t feel real.

“All this time, I’ve only ever had to worry about myself, but...that’ll have to change if I’m responsible for a child now. Am I even fit to be a mother? I...I’m not sure...”

Did my dearly departed mother and father feel this way when they had me? So giddy and restless, like they could fly...but gripped at the same time by a vague sense of dread?

“You’ll be fine.” Suimei reached out and laid his hand on mine as I clutched my tummy. “It’s okay, Kaori. I’m here for you.”

His hand was large and warm, engulfing mine. His embrace was firm, as if to prove that I was quite literally in good hands. I could faintly feel his body heat.

“I’ll always be right here beside you. Everything’s going to be all right.”

My nose stung and tears filled my eyes as I nodded wordlessly.

“Ahem! Forgetting someone? Mommy’s here for you too, sweetheart!”

Noname interjected, hands on her hips.

“Don’t forget me either,” Nyaa-san chimed in. “Though, to be fair, I’ve only ever raised kittens myself.”

That reminded me that Nyaa-san was a mother too. “I’d appreciate your insight,” I told her with a smile.

“And don’t think for one minute that you have to do everything on your own,” she continued. “You’ve got me, Noname, Suimei... It takes a village, as they say. At least, that’s how Shinonome raised you.”

“Shinonome-san...”

My heart ached like it was in a vise. My adoptive father had struggled to learn the ropes of child-rearing, and the thought that I was about to step into his shoes made me uneasy deep down in my chest. How would he have reacted to this news if he were still with us today? Would he have encouraged me?

God, I miss him so much.

A single tear rolled down my cheek. Sniffling, I wiped it away, then looked around at the others and smiled. “Thanks, everyone. I’m sure everything’ll be okay.”

I let out a breath. What a massive change this was going to be! Like a fool, I’d thought things would stay mostly the same for us. I’d never expected something like *this*!

Still...this was the best possible change. It felt so magical, so earth-shattering in its magnitude, that everything I’d ever been excited about seemed dull by comparison. I could already tell my outlook on life was going to change forever.

“Let’s just take things one day a time, Suimei,” I continued. “We’ll figure it out together...stuff like how we’ll juggle our jobs and all that. After all, something’s gotta give once the baby’s here!” I giggled.

“...Yeah,” Suimei nodded. But he wasn’t smiling.

The unease in his eyes reminded me that he didn’t exactly have a normal childhood himself. His mother, the one person who was on his side, passed away when he was still very young. From then on, he’d been forced to endure

unreasonably strict discipline from his father.

Although it was a family member who originally sent me to the spirit realm, I had lived a mostly peaceful life since then. The same was not true for Suimei. He wouldn't know what a normal family looked like; after all, for much of his life, "home" had not been a safe place for him.

Of course... Silly me... I'm not the only one who's nervous about this.

"We'll think it through together, every step of the way. We'll make sure our child has a better life than we did." With a smile, I grasped his hand firmly back. His expression softened with relief.

Just then, an easygoing voice called down to us from the mezzanine. "Oh heeey, the gang's all here! What's up, y'all?"

I could see Kuro peeking his head out from above, his tongue lolling out of his mouth. Evidently the commotion had finally woken him.

"Hm? Whahuh? Whahuhwhaaaa?" His ears perked up intently, and almost immediately he scrambled down the stairs in a flurry, dashed right up to me, got up on his hind legs, and howled, "Why's Kaori cryin', Suimei?! You're not s'posed to make your poor wife cry, ya useless bum!"

"Excuse me?"

While Kuro quivered with rage, Suimei stared back blankly, puzzled by the accusation. The rest of us looked down at the floor, desperately biting back laughter.

"Listen here, Kuro..."

"I don't wanna hear none of your excuses! If you love her, then you can't go around hurting her feelings! You think I don't know about the photo of her you use as a bookmark?! *And* I know about the parenting books you bought behind her back for whenever you start a family!"

The what?! Right as I looked up, Suimei slapped a hand over the dog's mouth. "Hold it, Kuro! Shut up for a second! Quit your inane babbling!"

"It's not *inane*, it's the tru... Mmpphh!"

Kuro flailed in misery, trying to escape the muzzle, but Suimei hoisted him up

under his arm. Sweating bullets, he smiled nervously. “Er, *anyway*...we’re going to the doctor tomorrow. We can go over the details after that.”

“Okay...sure...” Truth be told, I wasn’t sure I could hold my laughter any longer, but thankfully someone else slipped up first.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Congrats, Kaori! Sounds like he’s gonna be one hell of a daddy!” Kinme cackled.

“Stop! Don’t make fun of me!” Instantly, Suimei turned as red as a tomato. It was so cute and adorable that I could scarcely remember why I’d ever been worried to begin with. It was absurdly obvious that the man I loved would support me anytime I needed it.

I finally burst out laughing myself. “Ha ha ha ha ha! Guess we’ve got everything we need!”

Kinme and Noname clutched their sides while Nyaa-san heaved an exasperated sigh. The only one still confused was Kuro. “Whaddya mean, ‘daddy’? You’re going to the doctor? Is somebody sick? Guys, I don’t get it. Isn’t this a party for Suimei’s grand opening?”

At his question, we all exchanged glances, and...

“OH CRAP!” the twins shouted. They raced up to each side of Suimei and threw their arms around his shoulders.

“Sorry about that, pal! Totally slipped my mind! Congrats on the new store!” said Ginme.

“Guess we’ve got *two* reasons to congratulate you now! Hope you’re ready to work like a dog to feed your family!” said Kinme.

“Knock it off, both of you! You have the audacity to call yourselves my friends?!” Suimei roared.

“Awww, don’t get mad, bestie!” they replied in perfect harmony.

“Get off me! And where are my gifts?!”

“Wow, greedy much?” they joked. As the trio carried on, Noname and I exchanged a glance and a smile.

Though Kuro still seemed puzzled, he lit up with excitement all the same. “Hmmm, yeah, no, don’t get it. But I’m glad you’re all having fun!” Wagging his tail, he grinned adorably. “This is when Suimei officially leaves the nest. From here on, I hope he spends every day with a smile, just like today...forever and ever!”

His warm words resounded in my heart, and I returned his affection with a nod.

Each passing day brought a succession of new changes...especially in my body. The life that had taken root was slowly beginning to blossom. No longer was I just myself—I was growing into a mother at a dizzying speed.

Hear that, Shinonome-san? I’m gonna be a mom! Isn’t that crazy?

Do you think I’ll be a cool parent, like you were for me?

Will I have the strength to protect my child, like you did?

I was nowhere near finding the answers. My life had only just begun.

Chapter 2:

The Swallows' Nest

OUTSIDE THE RUN-DOWN apartment building, baby swallows chirped in their nest. Akiho lay beside the window, absently listening to the little birds as the warm spring sunshine streamed over her.

“Akiho?”

She turned at the sound of her name. Seemingly out of nowhere, a thin, kind-looking man was suddenly sitting right beside her. Chestnut-brown hair draped over his large glasses, and the pale hue of his cardigan contrasted well with his porcelain skin. Next to him was a shopping bag; it seemed that he'd just returned from the grocery store.

“Sorry, I was zoned out! Welcome back, Yoshiyuki-kun.”

She smiled, and he extended a hand. His fingers were rather slender and delicate for a man, with sensitive, untanned skin. Much more feminine than her dishpan hands.

“Mm...”

She bristled at the chill as he touched her forehead. Though the sun had arrived on time for spring, the temperature outside was still stuck in winter, and she was worried that her dear partner's bronchitis might flare up again. But when she saw the pout on his face, she nearly burst out laughing.

“What's gotten into you, silly?”

“...After seeing how much less vibrant you've been over these past months, I've been thinking a lot about this so-called 'pregnancy' condition.”

“So-called pregnancy?”

She giggled at his word choice, but he fell silent. Then, without a word, he began to put away the groceries. At first glance, it might have looked like she had upset him, but Akiho knew this wasn't a bad mood—he was just lost in thought. As he went about his business each day, his mind was firing on all

cylinders in constant pursuit of the truth. Because he was always observing something or other at any given moment, he wasn't very outwardly expressive, and those who didn't know him well often misread him.

It was their second year of marriage, and at long last, the baby they'd desperately hoped for was growing in Akiho's belly.

The couple had first met in college, but not as students. Yoshiyuki was an assistant professor researching literary history there, and Akiho was a part-time cafeteria worker. Normally, their paths rarely crossed...until one fateful day in the cafeteria.

Staff members were allowed to borrow books from the library, so Akiho would spend hours there every day after work. As a voracious reader who had already read everything on offer at the public library, it was paradise. Except for one little problem.

The next volume in the series she was currently reading? It had been checked out by an assistant professor at the research lab ages ago, and he still hadn't returned it. She was *dying* to read it, but no matter how long she waited, the book never came back! Eventually, she got so irritated that she stormed right up to that particular unfriendly professor when she spotted him in the cafeteria.

"I've had enough! How long are you planning to make me wait?! If you don't hurry up, I-I'll drop dead!" she howled with tears in her eyes, so wound-up that she forgot to explain what exactly she was upset about. Clueless and confused, Yoshiyuki froze like a deer in headlights, and unsurprisingly, the whole cafeteria began to buzz over the "lovers' quarrel" that was unfolding.

In any case, that incident was what brought the two together. As it happened, they were both total bookworms, and their similarities made them a good match for each other. They ended up getting married and starting a family. The baby's due date was just a month away, and the OB/GYN said it would most likely be a girl.

"Here."

"Thanks..."

When Yoshiyuki returned from the kitchen, he handed Akiho a plate of peeled

apple slices. She had struggled with morning sickness, not just the first trimester like most mothers but the entire pregnancy; in contrast to her swollen belly, the rest of her body was emaciated. Apples were one of the few foods she could manage to keep down.

“This pregnancy thing sure is rough, huh? I didn’t think it would be this bad.” The other expectant mothers at the maternity ward were enjoying their pregnancies to the fullest. Akiho was the only one enduring sheer agony every day...and frankly, she was sick of it.

As Yoshiyuki watched her muster up the energy to eat her apple slices, his expression clouded over with gloom. “I feel bad that I can’t share any of the burden.”

At this, a mischievous smile crept over her lips. “Oh? Would *you* rather be pregnant? I think I saw that in a Schwarzenegger flick once,” she joked. She appreciated how seriously he took her needs, and teasing was how she showed her love. But in her lightheartedness, she had forgotten one crucial detail: Yoshiyuki did not understand humor.

“Now there’s an idea... Would it even be possible with modern medical technology? I must admit, this sort of thing is outside my wheelhouse... Perhaps I should see if there are any scientific articles on the subject. I’d wager the US has made some progress on that front. That would be a long flight, though...all the way to America...”

His eyes had a dangerous glint to them. Before he could ponder it more seriously, Akiho cut in to stop him. “Whoa, whoa, slow down! The movie was make-believe, okay? It wasn’t real!”

Alas, he brushed her off. “Make-believe? Nonsense. *Someone* out there must be researching it. It’s hardly a unique idea, and yet it’s ever so slightly beyond our reach. There’s got to be a demand for it... Hmmm, I should look into this...”

Muttering to himself, he reached for the schedule lying nearby. If she didn’t act fast, he just might actually book them a flight! She knew from experience that her husband was quick and decisive in the *worst* of ways. They couldn’t go flying abroad with the baby due next month!

“Look, just...just calm down, Yoshiyuki-kun! Yes, the pregnancy’s been

miserable for me, but it hasn't been easy for you either! You've been doing all the household chores! And that really means a lot, since I know you're busy enough as it is with your classes and research!"

"But..."

"Besides, there's no way we could transfer the baby from me to you. I was *joking*, okay? Just kidding! Really! Please believe me!"

"I see..."

He slumped his shoulders in defeat while she gasped for breath. By some miracle, she had managed to talk him down. But his very next words had her doubting her own ears:

"Pity. Male pregnancy would be a once-in-a-lifetime sort of opportunity."

"...Come again? What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Well, it sounds fascinating, doesn't it?"

"Here I thought you were willing to do whatever it took to help your poor wife, but instead you were thinking of doing it just out of *curiosity*?! Unbelievable! And people say *I'm* an oddball!"

Yoshiyuki smiled bashfully while Akiho cracked up laughing. As she gazed around the apartment, she bit into a crisp, juicy apple slice.

"But hey, that's what I love about you," she mused wistfully.

Shelves crammed full of books lined their walls. As he was an assistant professor, Yoshiyuki's salary was by no means impressive, and there wasn't much space in their tiny apartment. The books that made it onto the shelves were carefully curated and squeezed into their budget between monthly expenses, like a greatest-hits collection of their own making. Akiho was used to people growing tired of her undying love for books, and it felt like a miracle to finally find someone who could share in that passion instead. Their life together wasn't easy, but she was content.

"I hope our daughter meets someone like you one day," she murmured, rubbing her tummy.

At this, even stone-faced Yoshiyuki frowned in confusion. "She hasn't been

born yet.”

“Oh, please. Don’t tell me you’re one of those dads who get overly sensitive about their daughters’ love lives!”

“Hard to say. I won’t feel like a real father until I’ve seen her face. Nonetheless, it’s clear to me that your statement is premature.”

“I mean, yeah, probably, but still...” She chuckled, gazing past his unexpressive face to the love hiding beneath. “It’s really hard to find a perfect match, you know? I only wish our daughter will be as lucky as I was to meet you.”

His earlobes burned bright red, and he shifted uncomfortably—telltale signs that he was feeling embarrassed. “I...I see. I suppose that makes sense.”

“Awww, thanks for understanding! They say girls fall for boys who remind them of their dad, so I’m sure she’ll choose someone who’s just like you: quiet, awkward, but fun to be around without needing to say a single word. Someone who will truly respect her.” She placed a hand on her pregnant belly. “And I’ll bet she’ll also have a miserable time with morning sickness. My mom did when she was having me, so I think it’s genetic. That’s why she’ll need somebody like you who can support her through it. It’s not easy, but it’s still a lot of fun waiting for the baby to arrive... One day it’ll all be a fond memory.”

She spread her arms wide and hugged the empty air. As she smiled warmly, her gaze seemed to reflect the daughter she had yet to meet.

“After she risks her life to give birth, they’ll get to hold their tiny little baby and gush about how cute it is. They’ll worry about whether they’ll be good parents, but if they work together, they’ll figure it out as they go. That’s why she needs the best possible partner, see?”

She smiled weakly, and Yoshiyuki gave a firm nod. “You’re exactly right.” After a pause, he fell into thought for a moment, then continued quietly: “We’ll need to think of a name for her.”

His pale eyes gazed into the distance. Akiho followed their trajectory toward the swallows’ nest built under the eaves.

“Once those babies leave the nest, it’ll really start to feel like summer.”

Swallows nested during the spring. After the chicks hatched, it would only take about three weeks for them to fully mature. By that point, the blossoms on the trees would be replaced by big, bright leaves, and then the young adults would take their first flight into a vivid green summer.

“Out in the brand-new world, they’ll make all sorts of connections, both good and bad, all interwoven and slowly growing. Eventually, they’ll seek out those bonds as they prepare to be parents themselves.” Yoshiyuki reached out and traced the empty air with his fingers, as if to pet the baby birds peeking up from the nest, crying for their mama. “How about...‘Kaori’? *Weaving in summer.*”

But Akiho simply blinked back at him. Flushed with excitement, he began to babble at high speed, gesturing emphatically.

“The calendar says it’s technically summer now, right? And your name means *autumn wheat*, so it’d keep the season theme going. Plus, *summer* is the season of growth and energy, so our daughter is sure to grow up healthy. And what’s more beautiful and feminine than the art of weaving? To *weave* is to interlace numerous vertical and horizontal threads together. If we think of it as a metaphor for connections, then our daughter will be stitching a patchwork quilt of bonds as she grows...or maybe she’ll be the thread that ties other people together! She’ll be able to put smiles on everyone’s faces. She’s sure to be loved by all those around her, just like her mother, and...oh...”

It was then, in the middle of his rambling tangent, that he realized his wife was staring at him blankly. Blushing in shame, he lost his momentum and slumped his shoulders.

“Sorry...I’m not trying to decide this without you or anything,” he mumbled sheepishly. “She’s your baby, so you have every right to name her whatever you...”

“*Kaori!* It’s perfect!”

“Huh?”

Akiho grinned from ear to ear. “It has a nice ring to it, *and* it goes well with my name! I love it!” She clapped him on the arm and beamed even brighter when he blinked back in confusion. Pressing a hand to her swelling stomach, she called out to the little life within. “Guess what, Kaori? That’s your name now!

Kaori.”

Her voice was so soft that it brought tears to Yoshiyuki’s eyes. His face burned, and he stepped close to his dear wife, savoring the joy of the moment. “Kaori...we’re so excited to meet you next month. I...er...D-Daddy’s really looking forward to it. He’s going to buy a lot of picture books to read to you.”

“Hee hee hee! Don’t forget about Mommy! We can all read the books together. It’s going to be sooo much fun!” She and Yoshiyuki shared a tender smile. “We’re going to live happily ever after, Kaori. Mommy and Daddy will make sure of it.”

The loving voices echoed quietly through the weathered old apartment. Akiho’s eyes wandered as she imagined her happy future with the love of her life and their child, and she smiled—until suddenly...

“HRRRRKKK!!!”

Out of nowhere, her cheeks puffed up like balloons. Her body had rejected the apple slices, and it was taking all she had to fight the urge to spit them up. She froze, hands clapped over her mouth.

“AAAAAAHHH! Hold it, Akiho! Hold it just for one second!” Yoshiyuki sprang to his feet, but... “Ghhgh!” He promptly stubbed his pinky toe on the coffee table and tumbled to the ground. Now he was on the verge of passing out from the pain, while his wife shook with nausea...

It was the end of spring, and the only sound in the old apartment was that of the swallow chicks rejoicing at their mother’s return. But it wouldn’t be long now before the loveliest little baby joined the nest.

Chapter 3:

Gentlemen's Late Summer

I LET OUT a small sigh. *It's too damn hot.*

Summer was nearing its end, yet the heat showed no signs of taking its leave. Sweat dripped from every pore of my raven Tengu body, and the endless cries of the cicadas only seemed to encourage it. The wet fabric of my shirt clung to my skin, and my underwear was soaked too. I had half a mind to go jump in the nearest lake.

If Shinonome were here, he'd be demanding an ice-cold beer right about now, I thought, smiling to myself. *Man, I wish I could've shared a drink with him just once.*

Then, as sweat ran down my face, and the memory of my old friend faded from my mind as my irritation flared, I thought to myself, *Why am I doing this again?* I heaved another sigh and stared at the floor uncertainly.

In front of me, the charcoal glowed red and crackled loudly. I was seated in front of an open hearth in a small, cramped room. Hanging from the pothook was a large vessel, its contents bubbling thickly like the Cauldron of Hell.

"Mwa ha ha ha... Boil harder! *Harder*, I say!"

A man gazed feverishly at the pot as it made sweltering *gloop, gloop* noises. He had dark, nearly black hair tied up at the crown of his head, and his skin was an exotic shade of brown...though whether it was his natural pigment or simply a tan, I didn't know. Beneath one of his steely eyes was a beauty mark, his hooked nose was slightly crooked, and his lips were turned up at the corners. He was clearly feeling the heat, because I could see sweat dripping from his pointed chin, and his jet-black patterned komon was in total disarray.

This spirit was known as Kami-oni, and he was the lord of this dwelling. The two of us were not especially close; in fact, his periodic blunt observations about me got under my skin. Yet here I was in this sauna of a room, seated in front of a boiling pot...and it was all my brother's fault.

“Somethin’ smells good! Is it almost ready?” Ginme, half-shirtless and a smile on his sweat-drenched face, asked the man sitting beside him. This gathering was for a particular group with whom he was affiliated, and he had forced me to tag along against my will, insisting that I wouldn’t regret it. Well, maybe it was just me, but so far, sitting here already seemed like a huge waste of my life.

Until about a year ago, Ginme and I had been practically inseparable, and I had taken it for granted that we’d stay that way. But now we were on different paths, each of us pursuing different goals.

One summer a few years back, the two of us discovered a half-human and half-spirit child lying abandoned inside a giant tree. At first it seemed we’d simply need to locate the parents, but then it turned out the child was a divine being. If memory served, it all got really complicated after that. Ultimately, that experience taught us an important lesson: Despite being twins, we were *not* carbon copies. We were free to have different outlooks and different dreams.

So, now that my brother and I were gradually becoming different people, I’d decided his taste in friends was none of my business, but...couldn’t he have picked a more *normal* group? I glanced around the room and noticed yet another man sitting beside the hearth.

“So this is miso... How very quaint! I do not relish the sight of it, but the aroma is lovely! Now I understand why that lass called it *osoma*,” the large man murmured excitedly, holding a popular manga in one hand. His garb—called an Attus robe, I’m told—was embroidered with complex Ainu patterns. A curtain of thick body hair hung over his gauntlets and gaiters, yet his head was completely bald. His name was Kim-un-aynu, and he was one of many gods worshipped by the Ainu people.

“Hey, don’t talk about that stuff before we eat,” Ginme cut in sharply at the first sign of potty talk. He knew that *osoma* was the Ainu word for *poop*.

“Apologies. We Ainu do not use much in the way of seasonings, so...it is new to me.”

“Guess I can’t hold it against ya, then. Miso’s the best! Eat as much as you want!”

“Oh, I most certainly will! Wa ha ha ha ha ha!”

Ginme and Kim-un-aynu guffawed loudly.

Simmering in the cauldron was horse-meat hotpot with a miso broth. Apparently, Kim-un-aynu became desperate to try some after a character in the manga he was reading referred to it as *osoma*, and thus he decided to hold this gathering. Ginme was utterly baffled by this but otherwise happy to join in the festivities. He was never one to miss a party, after all. He quickly got his hands on some horse meat, then talked Kami-oni into letting them use his dwelling as the event venue. Kami-oni readily agreed, since the group already met up regularly, and so the hotpot party became a reality.

“Damn, this is delicious! I didn’t know miso paired so well with horse meat!”

“Indeed, I can feel its perfection from the depths of my very soul... I am certain my lady Fuguruma-youbi would find it to her liking as well!”

“This *osoma* isn’t half bad. I should invite the people of my kotan to try it sometime...”

A bunch of sweaty men all eating from the same pot in a hot, cramped room... Frankly, it was like a scene from my worst nightmares. The food was the only silver lining.

This is such a waste of time... I want to go home... I didn’t know what had brought them all together, but surely they didn’t need me to be here. Concealing my sour mood, I ate in silence.

Then Ginme, who was already on his third helping, turned to me with a big grin on his face. “Aren’t you glad you got to try this great hotpot, Kinme? Just relax and enjoy your stay. I’m sure you’re tired from all that writing and stuff, so this should be a good change of pace!”

His smile was *dazzling*. My poor brother was just trying to do something nice for me, and here I was, complaining about it and wanting to leave... I shifted restlessly.

“Uh...y-yeah. So, anyway, you guys are all good friends, right?” I asked, smoothing over my guilt. “What kind of group *is* this? And why do you meet up so often? I can’t imagine what the three of you could have in common, so...I’m curious.”

The three of them exchanged a glance, and Kami-oni cleared his throat. “Ahem! Glad you asked. We are but scarred souls...fellow wounded soldiers who happened to find each other as we were wandering the desert of life in search of salvation. Our souls resonated, our threads inadvertently drawn to the pathos lurking within—”

“Could you spare me the poetry?” I retorted. *If I have to wait for this edgelord to finish his florid metaphors, we’ll be here all night.* Hoping for a simpler explanation, I looked at Kim-un-aynu, who set his bowl down with a stern expression.

“My comrade’s retelling is not altogether incorrect. We were all cut by the same blade, and it is not the sort of wound that can be healed easily. The objective of our group is to exchange intel in advance of the next battle.”

“Intel for a battle...?”

In the spirit realm, conflict between warring clans was an everyday occurrence. While it seemed peaceful at first glance, there was always new tension brewing somewhere. In this world, the ordinary and extraordinary were only a hair’s breadth apart.

They haven’t dragged my brother into something dangerous, have they...? Now I was nervous. Though we were on different paths in life, my dear brother would always be important to me, and the thought of something happening to him made a cold sweat trickle down my spine. I decided I had to offer my aid.

“What’s going on? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Ah! You would stand with us on the front lines, then?” Kim-un-aynu’s face lit up with delight. “Now that I think of it, gentlemen, Kinme is fully qualified to join our cause. Shall we recruit him?”

“Ooooh, that sounds great! He’s real smart, y’know!” Ginme nodded excitedly.

“I see... Yes, our group is in dire need of a strategist. What luck!” Kami-oni rejoiced, his face faintly flushed.

Now I was starting to feel uneasy. “Front lines of *what*? How serious is this?” It sounded like they were in real trouble, and my heart churned with dread.

“I would say it is very serious indeed—our lives are at stake,” Kami-oni replied with a grave expression. “Thus, we gather documents, consult experts, and periodically research methods of overcoming our predicament. When a consensus is reached, we implement our findings at once and report the results. That said, I would be glad to have your insight as well.” He started rummaging in his pocket. “I have with me the result of our carefully calculated strategy... Ginme, Kim-un-aynu, I presume neither of you object to me taking the lead this time?”

“Of course not, Kami-oni. As I recall, we spent three hours developing that new strategy during our last meeting. The document Ginme brought was vital to it.”

“Oh, that thing? Yeah, it sounded like an airtight plan to me! So, how’d it go?”

The other two gazed at Kami-oni in wide-eyed excitement. *What kind of airtight plan?* I straightened my posture. If lives were on the line, then I couldn’t afford to miss a single word.

“This is the result.”

Kami-oni pulled a lump of white fabric from his pocket that appeared to have been cut to shreds. What’s more, the word *DIE* had been written on it in red paint. To be blunt, it looked like something you’d find in a dumpster.

“What *is* that?” I asked, unable to contain my confusion.

“It is a waistcloth, an undergarment worn by women in olden times. In current parlance, they are known as ‘panties.’”

“Wh...*WHAT?!*” I howled, utterly flabbergasted.

Kami-oni leapt to his feet, loosened his belt, and then put one foot on the hearth’s edge and thrust his fist into the air.

“Allow me to explain! Having failed repeatedly in my attempts to court Fuguruma-youbi, I was wounded and fatigued. Countless times I swore I’d throw in the towel, yet the flames of my ardor remained unquenched! Thus, fortified with advice from my comrades, I made another attempt. As it so happens, in the human world there exists a tradition of men gifting panties to women, documented in the sage’s tome that Ginme brought us!”

He pulled out a magazine titled *Men's Wealth*. Printed on the cover in huge letters were phrases like “100 Ways to Bag a Hot Chick!” and “What Every Modern Man Needs: Patience and Pecs!” Then he flipped to a specific page titled *The Secret Spice for a Sexy Night with Her* and tapped the bullet point: *Surprise her with her favorite lingerie.*

Gaaaaaaahhhhh! This is your idea of a sage's tome?! As I was resisting the impulse to face-palm, Kami-oni continued excitedly, cheeks flushed.

“According to this tome, one makes an offering of undergarments in the hope of building an intimate connection. This gesture also indicates the desire to make her solely yours. Thus, I decided I would give her a waistcloth. After all, an intimate connection with Fuguruma-youbi is precisely what I want! Consumed by desire, I lie in bed each night wrestling with my—”

“Don’t finish that thought,” I cut in, my expression deadly serious. Clearing his throat, he sat back down.

“...My apologies. Anyway, the plan was flawless, but nevertheless, I would like to tell you all the result. The expression in Fuguruma-youbi’s eyes... I realized it was precisely the look one wears when witnessing the most disgusting thing to ever curse the earth! She ordered her servants to shred the waistcloth—and then leapt upon me, beating me senseless! In the process I bit my cheek, and every spoonful of hotpot stings...”

He smiled sadly, as if reliving the memory. I could easily picture Fuguruma-youbi telling him to “clench his jaw” before viciously punching his lights out. Then I realized that the word *DIE* had been written not with paint but with his blood... As I shuddered, he continued his tale.

“I can only assume Fuguruma-youbi did not appreciate my gift. She has not made eye contact with me since that day...not that it was a common occurrence to begin with.”

“So, your plan failed?”

“Indeed! My strategy of wearing them for three days straight to imbue them with my scent seems to have had precisely the opposite effect. There was a tang to them that was surely too strong for her delicate nose...”

“Okay, yikes, but I don’t think *that* was your main mistake here!” I said.

Alas, Kami-oni didn’t seem to hear me. “I overdid it... Two days would have sufficed,” he lamented, slumping his shoulders. It was official: He was a pervert with weird sexual proclivities. I couldn’t relate to him in the slightest.

“Uhhh...Ginme...?” One minute I was afraid a war was brewing, and the next, some guy was subjecting me to his creepy fetish. I didn’t like where this was going, so I turned to my twin. “As your brother, I’m kiiinda gonna need you to explain something...”

“Huh? Sure thing! Ask away!” he replied with a carefree grin. He, too, was completely oblivious.

Swallowing hard, I summoned my courage to ask: “What *exactly* is this group?”

“It’s a spirit realm bachelors’ club where single guys get together and talk about how to win a lady’s heart! I figured it’d be good to know for later, so I asked to join!” He gave me a thumbs-up.

Aaaaagggghhh! I reflexively glared up at the ceiling. I’d known Ginme was still getting over Kaori; he once said he would wait until her next life to pursue her again. But I had no idea he was struggling this hard with it!

His crush on her had lasted for years, but she chose Suimei in the end, and I’d seen firsthand how badly it hurt him. That said, he eventually recovered from it. I remembered how he vowed to devote himself to self-improvement in the hopes that his next crush would be mutual.

How did it lead to this, dammit?!

This was a precarious situation. If I didn’t act fast, Ginme could end up developing a creepy fetish of his own! Or what if he tried to use the poorly vetted “intel” he gained here to make a move on his next crush...? She’d call him a dirty pig, and then his heart would shatter into a thousand pieces! Now *that* was a rejection from which he might never recover...

I can’t let that happen! Rage began to well up in my gut. I wanted my twin to keep his cheerful spirit forever. The one thing I needed to protect at all costs was his happiness! *What have you people done to my brother?! I’ll eradicate*

you!

But just then, I stopped myself. Kaori was still very much alive, so Ginme wouldn't meet her reincarnation for decades to come. Yes...there was still time to steer him back on the right path before he fully set foot in the garden of perverts!

I need to keep things peaceful so Ginme won't get mad at me. First things first: I gotta get him away from these dudes before he's infected by their bad influence!

"A swift death to those who mislead my brother!" Seized by a perfectly healthy sense of duty, I grabbed him by the arm. "Ginme, we're leaving. The air isn't safe—it'll poison your lungs, and you'll start to stink like them!"

"Huh? Leave? Wh-what for? I wanna stay and—"

"No! Nothing good will come of hanging around with men like them. You want to date Kaori after she reincarnates, right? And be her mate? Then you have to stick to the path!" I pointed at Kami-oni. "See that? *That's* what happens when you make the wrong move. Do you want your crush to hate you from the depths of her soul? To jump on you and beat you senseless?"

"Don't be absurd! It was arguably a reward in its own way!" Kami-oni protested.

"Do me a favor and keep your mouth shut. I don't want your degenerate voice to taint my brother's eardrums." I shot him a malicious glare, then turned back to Ginme, choosing my next words carefully. "There's really no need to come up with a strategy to tell someone how you feel. If she feels the same way, then the normal method will be enough."

"You really think so?"

"I know so! Seriously, think about it. How would *you* feel if someone you weren't even dating gave you some clothes they'd been wearing?"

"Uhh...well, I'd be kinda confused, but I'd say thank you!"

"...Right." I'd honestly underestimated just how purehearted my dear brother was. I gave him a pat on the back. "Good, good. Keep that attitude as you grow

up, and don't ever get too jaded."

"Oh...okay!" He seemed puzzled but happy.

Nngh...if only I could have a heart as pure as my twin's... I gazed into the distance, processing the emotional damage I'd accidentally taken. Then Kim-un-aynu finally broke his silence.

"Truth be told, I was uncertain about the undergarment strategy, myself."

"Suddenly you betray me?!" Kami-oni howled, looking at him in horror.

"Heh..." Rubbing his upper lip, the large, hairy man straightened his posture and turned to face the group. "When it comes to professing one's love, I believe it's best to follow tradition."

Finally, a good take...and from the last person I'd expected too. Indeed, keeping with tradition was often the most reliable option. Take love letters, for instance. Kaori and Suimei had stayed connected by exchanging letters for a while. Perhaps Kim-un-aynu had some valuable insight to offer. "Tell me, what sorts of traditions are there?" I asked curiously.

He thrust out his chest proudly. "According to Ainu tradition, when you wish to take a woman as your bride, you eat half of your meal and then offer her the other half. If she is willing to eat it, then your proposal has been accepted."

Ginme's eyes lit up. "I've heard of that! It's sorta like asking her to share your life, in a way. Pretty romantic if you think about it!"

Kim-un-aynu smiled bashfully. "Isn't it? That's why I've been devising plans to get a lass to eat my food."

Wait a minute... Not sure I like where this is going... My face stiffened. Why would he need to *devise a plan* if he was just following tradition? As I was bracing myself, Kim-un-aynu pulled something out of a cloth bundle: a plastic food storage container.

"My current strategy is...being Insta-worthy."

"Insta-*what*?"

He popped off the lid to reveal its contents: grated daikon radish. "Haven't you heard? In modern times, it is popular to submit photographs of beautiful or

adorable things to...*so-shul mead-yuh*. The most fitting photos are deemed 'Insta-worthy.'"

As he explained, he grabbed his half-eaten bowl of food and began to arrange the radish peelings with his spoon. For such a mountain of a man, he was quite deft with his hands. With a startling level of concentration, he hunched over the bowl, crafting away. And a few minutes later...

"Ooooh, that's amazing!" Ginme cheered.

Inside the bowl, the radish had transformed into a cute polar bear, resting its arms on the edges of the bowl with its lower body concealed in the soup, as if it were relaxing at a hot spring. It even had black sesame seed eyes and a nose. My eyes widened.

"*This* is Insta-worthy, gentlemen!" Kim-un-aynu rubbed his lip again, pleased with himself. Even I had to admit it was adorable. Definitely the sort of thing girls would like.

"So then, what do you do with it?!" Ginme asked eagerly, eyes sparkling.

In response, Kim-un-aynu reached back into the cloth bundle and pulled out a smartphone. "Next, we will take photographs together. Women become giddy when they see something cute, do they not? She will surely enjoy testing out different angles and filters to make the image as Insta-worthy as possible."

"Oooh, that sounds like fun! And a great way to get to know her better!"

"Uhhh...okay, sure, but what's the goal there?" My brother was genuinely impressed, but I still felt uneasy. Wasn't it supposed to be a proposal? If so, then there had to be more to it than just a photoshoot, right?

Kim-un-aynu grinned cheerfully, flashing his yellow teeth. "Once the woman is giddy from taking photos, she will surely forget that I have already eaten some of the food. At that point I will say to her, 'Horse-meat hotpot with grated daikon looks an awful lot like Mount Daisetsu, doesn't it? I wonder what it tastes like.'" His eyes glinted sharply as he clenched a fist and thrust it skyward. "Then she will become curious and have a taste...and with that, the proposal will have succeeded!"

"Yeah, because you *tricked her into it*, you scumbag!" I shouted back

uncontrollably.

He pouted his lips. “And? What difference does it make if I tricked her? She ate my leftovers. That is all that matters!” he declared without an ounce of shame.

Gaaaahhh, I knew it! He’s a no-good creep just like Kami-oni! “So your idea of a proposal is ‘no take-backsies’?! That’s straight-up evil! Are you really so desperate to get married that you’re willing to play dirty?!”

“SILENCE! OF COURSE I’M DESPERATE!” he roared back, so ferociously that I flinched. Fat tears spilled from his eyes as he slammed his fist on the floor with a pathetic grimace. “I just... All I want is...TO PROVE KAPATCIR-KAMUY WROOOOONG!”

If memory served, Kapatcir-kamuy was Kim-un-aynu’s bitter rival. *Let me take a wild guess...* “Did he find a wife before you did?” I asked dryly.

He curled into a ball, knees tucked under his chin. “They were wed in the spring of last year...and ever since then, he’s done nothing but gush about his wife... Her fair face, her cooking, her ample bosom... ‘My wife’ this, ‘my wife’ that...” A fresh wave of tears streamed from his eyes. “He and I are companions of long standing, and while I wouldn’t deem us friends...I secretly looked forward to all those times he would come and target me with his jests! He was the only one who paid me any attention! But the moment he was betrothed... WAAAAAHH! Who’s more important, me or his wife?!”

“His wife, obviously!”

“Well then, I’ll procure a wife of my own! And then I’ll go boast to him about her!” He covered his face with his hands, rolled onto his side, and wailed like a child. “I want a pretty bride, and I don’t care how I get her! I’m going to take a wife, no matter what others say about my tactics! A young wife with a stupendous chest!”

“That last part is exactly why no one will ever marry you!” *Yep, this guy’s screwed.* I rolled my eyes at his selfish demands. Then, with a sigh, I calmly poked holes in his logic. “Look, you live on the Daisetsuzan Range, right? How exactly are you planning to post on social media? Do you get service up there? Plus, there’s no way you have a cell phone plan when you don’t even have a

legal ID. So, where'd you get the smartphone? You didn't buy it, did you?"

"Nnngh! No...a hiker dropped it..."

"Then I'm guessing the battery's been dead for a long time. How would you charge it when your kamuy kotan doesn't even get electricity?"

"It...needs electricity...? I thought it could be revived with a certain ritual..."

"Uhhhh... Okay, *where* exactly did you learn about social media and all that?"

Kim-un-aynu turned to look...at the *Men's Wealth* magazine.

"Goddamn it! This is your problem right here!" Enraged, I took the stupid rag and flung it into the fire where it belonged.

"AAAAAAHHHH!!! THE SAGE'S TOME!!!" they all screamed in unison.

"*Sage's tome*, my ass! SNAP OUT OF IT!" I roared back at them, and they slumped their shoulders.

"But I was so lucky to find it under that bridge!" Ginme whined, like a grade-schooler who'd come across someone's discarded porno magazine.

Oh, for the love of... "Listen, if you think you can grab some cheap advice from a magazine and use it to win a lady's heart, you're dead wrong," I declared firmly.

At this, their shoulders slumped even lower. Was getting married really worth going this far? I knew Kami-oni was in love with Fuguruma-youbi, and I'd heard that Kim-un-aynu's thirst for a wife had caused some tremendous late fees at the library, but I'd never imagined their desperation had driven them to these lengths... In all honesty, I couldn't understand it. I could understand wanting someone to make you their beloved, but it seemed like a gamble to expect it of a total stranger.

I shot a glance at Ginme, my other half. From the moment we were born, he'd taken first place for me. I knew the feeling wasn't mutual, and I had already come to terms with it. Still, I had no intention of ever trying to find someone else.

That's funny... Why does he look kind of pale and sweaty?

“Hey, Ginme? These losers didn’t give you any weird ideas of your own, did they?”

“Urk!”

“Ah, so they did.”

“Um...y-yeah...”

As his eyes darted to and fro, I gave him a withered look. “Are you stupid?”

“Nnngh! Am I...? Okay, tell you what, Kinme. Why don’t I explain what my plan was gonna be? For the record, uh...I *did* put a lot of thought into it. You know, setting the scene for a romantic declaration of love and all that. But I don’t know if it’s good or not.”

From the look on his face, he seemed to understand where Kami-oni and Kim-un-aynu had gone wrong. He looked at me nervously.

“*Fiiiine*, you win.” Personally, I was just happy that my brother was asking me for advice. “So, tell me, what’s your plan? It better not involve any panties or dirty tricks,” I cautioned him with a grin.

“No, nothin’ like that!” he shot back, pouting his lips. Then he hopped to his feet and said, “I’ll be right back.” With that, he left the room.

Oh boy, here we go. I really hope it’s something normal...but if these creeps are involved, I’d better not hold my breath...

The next instant, something dawned on me that drained the blood from my face. Now that Ginme had left the room, all that remained was the sound of a giant man sobbing, the mutters of a lunatic clutching shredded panties and staring into space, and a bubbling pot. To put it bluntly, this was my own personal hell.

Hurry back, Ginme!!!

Sweat dripped from my pores, and I was terrified that the other dudes’ toxicity would seep into me. I sat and waited, quaking like a leaf, until the door finally slid open once more and Ginme peeked in.

“Um...sorry I took so long...” Blushing, he walked in...and my eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. “Whaddya think? If I profess my love wearin’ this,

any girl's as good as mine!"

He was actually wearing an all-white tuxedo.

"This is my battle gear! The ladies love a well-dressed man, right? So, if I wear a tux, I might even be able to propose—"

"Nnnnope! Denied!" I crossed my arms in front of my chest.

"How come?!" he whimpered.

Clutching my aching head, I decided to set him straight for his own good.

"The goal of your plan is to profess your love, right? Not to propose. So why the hell are you wearing a tux? It's too much all at once! It's a red flag!"

"Urk...!"

"Why are you trying to skip all the way to marriage? Can you put yourself in her shoes, or have you forgotten how to be considerate of others? Are you a sociopath?"

"Ggghh...!"

"If you showed up wearing that, she would turn around and leave! Guaranteed!"

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!" With a bloodcurdling scream, Ginme curled into the fetal position. The sound of torn fabric soon followed, and I strongly suspected he had just ripped his pants.

"This is exactly why I said we should get out of here." As he grieved, I put a hand on his shoulder. "These dudes have nothing to offer you but bad ideas. And who can blame them? They've never dated anyone in their lives!" I declared with a smirk.

"That is because I am *devoted to one woman!*" Kami-oni shot back with bloodshot eyes. "Fuguruma-youbi is my heart's sole desire. Thus, it follows that I have no experience in courtship. Do not liken me to the sort of man who would settle for anyone with a pulse!"

"Just one moment! You are not talking about *me*, are you?!"

Kami-oni's barbed comment had landed a clean hit. Veins bulging with rage,

Kim-un-aynu stormed over and grabbed him by the collar.

“For your information, I am open to love wherever it may be found! I am not so foolish as to do the same thing again and again while expecting different results!”

Yes, you are!!!

Kim-un-aynu glared at Kami-oni, all the hairs on his body standing on end like he was about to explode. The bachelors’ club of the spirit realm was done for, and I didn’t even have to lift a finger. But right as I was smirking to myself, Ginme said something I truly wasn’t expecting:

“I get it. So we need somebody with hands-on experience... Who do we know that’s real familiar with this kinda stuff...? Oh, I just remembered! Kinme, didn’t that one spirit girl ask you out the other day? The one who lives in a row house?”

“Wh... How do you know about that?!”

Uh oh. A cold sweat trickled down my back as I glanced around. Kami-oni and Kim-un-aynu were both staring at me, their eyes wide as saucers.

“Cuz I talk to one of her friends sometimes. I hear she’s a pretty cute girl...but you turned her down, huh? Wow, you must be a chick magnet if you’ve got girls making the first move! C’mon, tell us your secret! Whaddya say?”

I cursed my brother’s innocence. This was not the time or place for that discussion! “I-I don’t have a secret,” I stammered, inching backward. But my fears proved true, because the two large men closed in on me from either side.

“Oho, I see. So you’re telling me you crushed a young maiden’s tender loving heart,” said Kami-oni.

“How very fascinating. I would *love* to hear all about it,” said Kim-un-aynu.

Their perfectly level voices only made the entire situation creepier. Sweating bullets, I put on a stiff smile...but they clamped down on each of my arms and prevented my escape. “We humbly beg for your guidance and encouragement, Sensei,” they said in unison.

AAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!! I KNEW THIS WAS HELL!!! I WANT TO GO HOME!!!

The stench of their sweat enveloped me, and I fought the urge to puke. This was literal torture. My only option was to talk my way out of it!

“Well, uh, I can’t say for sure if there’s something attractive about me, but...”

“Are you feigning modesty?” asked Kami-oni.

“Modesty merely fuels my wrath. Might I punch you in the gut?” asked Kim-un-aynu.

“Let’s not get violent!” I shouted in protest. As they scowled, I continued: “Look, based on what I’ve heard today, none of you are trying to improve yourselves. You think you can win a woman by giving the right gifts, or wearing the right clothes, or trapping her? That’s not what makes someone fall in love!”

If it were, then no one would ever struggle to find a partner. As common as it was to hear about “love at first sight,” that sort of superficial attraction rarely lasted long in this world. What actually fueled that fire was the belief that the other person was someone you *needed*, both in body and in mind... That was my best guess, anyway.

“What you each need to work on isn’t your strategy, it’s *yourself*! All of you, go look in the mirror! How would *you* describe a guy who clutches a pair of shredded panties with a creepy smile on his face? It’s objectively a bad look!”

“Urgh!”

“And if a big, hairy bear-man tried to force his leftovers on me, I’d call the cops!”

“Nn...gghh...”

“And if a guy I wasn’t even dating showed up in a tux, I’d head for the nearest exit immediately!”

“Gggghhhh...!”

Kami-oni and Kim-un-aynu collapsed in tears. Happy to have my arms free, I slowly backed my way toward the exit. I was so close to escaping...

“Eeeek!”

Of course, it wasn’t going to be that easy. Kami-oni grabbed the hem of my

slacks and looked up at me like I was his last hope. “What are we to do?! If all our efforts thus far have gone to waste, where should we set our sights?!”

How should I know?! I really couldn't care less! I nearly said this out loud, but then I saw the sadness in Ginme's eyes.

“Kinmeeee...help us...!” The way he was slumping his shoulders made him look like an abandoned kitten on a rainy day.

Gritting my teeth, I scratched my head in frustration. *Fine, whatever!* “I can't tell you where to ‘set your sights,’ okay? There's no specific answer to that. You have to take a hard, unbiased look at yourself and think about what you truly need.”

On the other hand, why *did* that girl ask me out? She must have had some reason to like me. Her exact words to me were: *“Your vibe has really changed lately, Kinme-san! It's made me curious about you.”* But only two things about me had fundamentally changed: I'd abandoned my old isolationist outlook, and I'd started traveling the world to write new volumes of *Selected Memoirs*.

And as I expanded my horizons and learned about the outside world, I naturally developed a more open mind. I never used to think too hard about the clothes I wore, but at some point, they no longer felt right for me, so I switched to a more comfortable outfit with fancy leather shoes. It was such a refreshing change that my spirits lifted and I wanted to see even more of the world. Now I was one step ahead of the person I used to be.

In short, the best way to get someone to like you is to improve yourself and be the best possible version of you! Surely I'm not wrong here, am I?

“Okay...this is just my personal opinion, but...”

And so, I explained my thought process to the group while they nodded in amazement. Evidently at least some of it must have rung true for them.

“I see. Self-improvement... So *that's* the answer... How very poetic...”

“Glad you understand.” I let out a sigh of relief. *Maybe now they'll stop coming up with harebrained schemes,* I thought.

Unfortunately, these men were even dumber than I'd anticipated.

“I get it! What we need is muscle!”

...Uhhhh? I froze, then stiffly turned to look at Kim-un-aynu. His face was flushed with excitement.

“If a man is to improve himself, then lifting weights is the natural choice! All women swoon at the sight of muscles. Therefore, most problems can be solved by getting swole! Yes, what we need is muscle!”

Are you out of your mind?! The blood drained from my face. A huge guy like Kim-un-aynu was already brawny enough as it was! Why would he sabotage his own chances by getting even bigger?! *Surely the other two won't agree with him, will they?* Desperately, I looked over at them.

Sadly, they all seemed to share a single brain cell.

“Ooooh, you're right! When I first got an eight-pack, all the neighbor ladies said I looked handsome! Yeah, that must be the ticket!” Ginme sprang up like a fish who had been thrown back into the water.

Those ladies were just being polite! How are you this unbelievably innocent?! Should I drag you through a swamp sometime?!

“Mwa ha ha...! Now I see! I must seduce Fuguruma-youbi with my toned muscles! Oh, my soul hungers... She will lose herself in my femoral biceps...!”

Why would she be into your thigh muscles?! Or do you just want her to look at your groin, you creep?! God, I'm sick of you! Go boil to death in the Cauldron of Hell!

There was so much I wanted to say that I started to feel dizzy. Maybe I was getting heat stroke from staying in this room for too long. Feeling lightheaded, I braced myself against the nearest wall while the other guys eagerly planned their workouts.

“I suspect the best option is to invest in weight training machines. It is hard to train excessively with body-weight exercises. For maximum efficiency, we should craft a routine that takes advantage of our regenerative abilities and incorporates the most effective amount of protein and BCAA into our diets.”

Hey, Kim-un-aynu? How do you know so much about building muscle when

you live in a remote mountain village? And all those big words you're using! Why can't you apply those book smarts to something more productive?!

"Okay, I have no clue what any of that means, but I'll do it! I'm good at exercising!"

If only my stupid brother would use his brain for five seconds! Dimly, I realized that these men were truly unsalvageable...and Kami-oni sealed the deal with his next words.

"I see, I see. Well then, it seems we know our destiny. We shall hone our bodies... Hm, but we'll need a fitting venue. Perhaps we should rent a condo somewhere...or buy one, for that matter! And since training is a lonely endeavor, we could adopt a pet cat to bolster our morale..."

"Oh, I like the sound of that! Let us seek a good location with a lovely view, then procure a plethora of high-quality furniture. I have been single my whole life, so I can easily afford it!"

"Huh? Um, okay! I don't get it, but it sounds cool!"

As I listened to their cheerful conversation, I stared into space. "A group of single guys buying a condo together and adopting a cat...? That's practically *begging* for perma-bachelor status...!"

Don't go down that road! It's not safe!!! Alas, I was too exhausted to try to shout over their babbling. *Eh, I can just rescue Ginme later.* And with that thought, I tuned out.

As for whether those men ever found romance...I'll leave that to your imagination.

Chapter 4:

Father and Son

I WAS SITTING ON THE PORCH, staring absently at the yard. Beneath the endless night sky, everything was tinged red, from the trees to the well to the storage shed. The autumn breeze tickled my cheeks.

It was late, and I'd already be in bed if this were any other night. But I wasn't going to get much sleep tonight; I had other priorities. I glanced over at the building next door, where lights glowed through the windows. Judging from the chatter, they were still hard at work over there. A sigh escaped my lips, and a glowing butterfly floated across my vision. I turned my somber eyes away from its light.

"Nervous?" a voice called from behind me.

I recognized it instantly, so I didn't bother turning to look at him. Instead, I lowered my gaze to the ground and rubbed my chilly fingers. There was a faint rustle of fabric, followed by the old wood creaking wearily.

"Reminds me of the old days... I was nervous too, you know."

My father Seigen was now sitting beside me, wearing a vest over a starched white button-up shirt. His black dress slacks were perfectly ironed, and his leather shoes gleamed dully in the glimmerflies' glow. Reluctantly, I looked up and met his caramel eyes. I remembered Kaori saying that their warm hue was slightly darker than mine.

"You? *Nervous*? That's ridiculous," I scoffed, turning away brusquely. Somehow, I felt him smiling wryly in response.

"It's the truth. I mean, yes...I was broodier back then. All I cared about was whether my beloved would make it through. So perhaps I don't truly understand how it feels to endure the final moments before the arrival of a child."

We'd learned that Kaori was pregnant early this spring. The seasons came and

went, and now it was fall. For us, the days had felt like both an eternity and a blink—special, yet ordinary. The biggest challenge was her morning sickness. For most it went away after the first three months, but hers had lasted the entire pregnancy. Forty straight weeks as my wife’s caretaker... Kind of sad to think that it was coming to an end tonight.

Yes, Kaori was currently going through the agony of labor. The bookstore was too small and cramped, so Noname and the other experienced mothers had moved her over to the apothecary instead. I offered to help, but they insisted I’d only get in the way. *Childbirth is a woman’s battle*, Kaori said to me. *We’ll call you when it’s time to hold the baby.*

After they kicked me out, I came here to the porch. No way in hell could I fall asleep knowing my wife was fighting for her life. The trees rustled loudly in the night breeze, a perfect metaphor for my state of mind.

“Is that all you came to... No, forget it.” I started to snap at my father but dropped it partway through. Under these circumstances, he was aggravating me more than usual, and while we were never on good terms, there was no sense in picking needless fights.

But of course, Seigen had no regard for the consideration I’d showed. “Oh, did I say something wrong? Here I was worried my son might need some reassurance.”

“...You don’t mean a word of that. I don’t need your lies.”

He laughed amiably. “I assure you I’m not lying. My goodness... Seems like I’ve got a good while yet before I can regain your trust.”

I shot him a dubious look. “*Regain?* When have I ever trusted you?”

He blinked back at me for a moment before his rugged handsome face creased in delight. “Point taken! Ha ha ha!”

“Not sure why you’re laughing, but whatever,” I sighed, my breath melting into the night air. The cold wind blew my long bangs across my eyes. Looking back, it was this man’s fault those silky strands had turned white in the first place.

Allegedly, Seigen had loved my mother Midori from the bottom of his heart.

He was an extremely untalented exorcist, and no one in his life had ever wanted him around...that is, until my mother took him into her family as her husband.

Her constitution was so poor that giving birth was risky for her. Naturally, Seigen was opposed to the idea since he couldn't afford to lose her. But she loved him very deeply, and though I never got the chance to ask her directly, I suspect she dearly wanted to have his child.

Perhaps it came as no surprise when she became bedridden after giving birth to me. Then, three years later, she passed away. My father despised me after that; under the pretext of "training his heir," he abused me when I was a young child. To this day, I couldn't bear to recall those memories. So when I first decided to end my career as an exorcist, I swore I'd never speak to him again... and yet, during this pivotal moment in my life, here he was, next to me.

"Good grief. Life throws nothing but curveballs, apparently," I muttered in spite of myself.

"Damn right," Seigen nodded. "Who'd have thought I'd meet my grandchild in the spirit realm of all places?"

Not exactly what I meant, but it looked like he, too, found our current situation bizarre. With an amused smile, he gazed at the glowing butterfly that had perched on his finger. Something about it pissed me off, and I scoffed, "What are you so excited about? Are you stupid or what?"

"Oh dear, I've offended you."

As he chuckled, I glared back at him. "You wished I was never born. Yes or no?"

"...Yes."

"Then what do you care about your grandchild?"

This wiped the smile off his face. For a moment I worried that I'd crossed a line, but I quickly thought better of it. An innocent child was about to join our family, and since the two of us were out here alone, it was time to settle things with him once and for all.

"Suimei..." His expression turned somber.

"If only you hadn't been born. You took Midori from me," I recited.

His eyes widened, and he frowned uncomfortably. "Those were my exact words, yes. I'm surprised you remember."

"How could I forget a gut punch like that? Back then, I was still a child... I thought I needed someone else's approval for my life to have value." I remembered how the raw, visceral hatred from my biological father made me struggle to breathe. It was Kaori who saved me then. She accepted me just as I was, and there was no telling what would have happened to me if it weren't for her.

"...For the record, I do feel bad."

That was the final straw that ignited my emotions.

"For what? What exactly do you feel bad about? Saying those words to me? Abusing me? Hurting the woman I love in the name of your own greed?! Killing dozens of spirits to wreak havoc in the spirit realm?!" As I shouted at him, I grabbed him by the collar. The resemblance we shared only enraged me further. "At my wedding, you promised Shinonome you would try to be a father...but frankly, I don't trust a word of it. It's been a few years, and we've tried to build something since then. But I'm terrified of the moment you'll rip your mask off, just like you did before!" Once I got it all off my chest, I relinquished my grip on him. "Seigen, you may be the grandfather of my child, but I haven't decided what that means yet."

As he stood there like a statue, I turned away from him once more. I was so worked up that my heart was pounding in my ears. He didn't seem to have a comeback, and the silence was painful to me.

Then, finally, he let out a small, mirthless laugh. "Silly me. For some reason I thought I'd been forgiven."

His feeble voice made my chest ache. I looked at his pitiful expression out of the corner of my eye.

"Not sure why, since the charges against me are not so easily pardonable... Ah, I see." Tears sprang to his eyes. This was not the father who'd abused me, nor the mastermind of a wicked plot. At this moment, he was just a tired old

man. "Spending time with you and Kaori-kun has been so peaceful... I must have deluded myself into thinking I was part of the family you created." Smiling sadly, he looked directly into my eyes. "But to be clear, that apology is no lie. And I won't try to take back what I said to you in the past."

I scowled. "Why the hell not? You could just make something up...pretend you didn't mean it to make yourself look better. Maybe it would change what I think of you. Not that I'm interested in perfunctory excuses."

"Indeed. Like me, my son doesn't pull any punches." A chuckle arose from the back of his throat, and he shrugged with a sigh. "Unfortunately, I *did* mean it. Back then, Midori was the only light in my life. I wasn't happy when she had you, and when she got so much sicker afterward, I blamed it on the childbirth. My anger over her death never went away, and I believed without question that it was justified." He gazed into the distance, squinting in the dim glow of the glimmerflies. "Those words cannot be retracted lightly, because I would be rejecting the man I was back then. I do regret my foolishness, but I don't wish to pretend my life never happened."

"What, so the words you said to me were the product of your entire life?"

"That's right. Love and hatred and remorse. They define who I am, and I cannot pretend otherwise."

His soft smile put me at a loss for words. But as I remained quiet, he reached out to me.

"Clearly I've been naive. It seems I shall have to wait for quite some time yet before I look upon the face of my grandchild." He ruffled my hair. "But...let me say this, I suppose."

His face crinkled around his eyes, showing the deep wrinkles etched over decades.

"Though I won't take back my past remark, I hope you'll let me add a new one. For example...let's see...*I enjoy my time with you, and I'm grateful now that you were born.*" He rose to his feet, smoothed his clothes, and turned away. "Now then, I'd better head off for today. And I *will* make an effort! I'll convince you I'm worthy to be a father...and a grandfather as well. I promised Shinonome, after all, and despite what you may think, I'm a man of my word."

He began to shrink into the distance, and I clenched my fists. Murky feelings swirled in my chest and tormented me. Infuriatingly, he not only knew what needed to be said, but he made it look so *easy*. The longer I remained stuck in the past, the more I'd look like a bratty kid throwing a tantrum!

“Wai—”

But before I could stop him, a feeble cry resounded from the house next door. Seigen stopped in his tracks, and we both turned in that direction.

“Waahh! Waahh! Waahh!”

The unmistakable sound of a human baby. In an instant, my mind went blank. As we stood there, frozen in silence, someone came barreling up to us.

“The baby's here! Hurry!” It was Noname, her expression fatigued but jubilant. When she spotted Seigen, she stormed up to him. “You too, Mister!”

“Er...wait a moment. I...”

He looked at me as if asking for help, but I didn't know what to do either. A moment passed, and then Noname exploded with rage.

“This is no time to deliberate! Are you coming or not?!”

“Yes, *ma'am*!” we blurted in unison.

The apothecary was oppressively hot, likely from the large amounts of boiled water. The women bustled around, all of them clearly exhausted yet visibly relieved.

“Come, come. She's in this room.”

At Noname's prompting, I weaved my way through the busy midwives.

“Congrats!”

“You're a father!”

Their warm words tugged at my heartstrings.

Kaori was apparently in the room at the far back. I stood in front of the sliding door, then reached out with a shaking hand and slowly opened it.

“Suimei...”

Beneath the dim light of a glimmerfly lantern, I could see Kaori sitting up in bed, exhaustion etched into her face, sweat dripping from her forehead, her complexion alarmingly pale. But she had a look of accomplishment in her eyes... and she held a brand-new life in her arms. For some reason, it made me want to cry. My eyes burned and my body trembled.

“C’mon, don’t just stand there. Come see him.”

She beckoned to me. The baby was small, his skin bright red and more wrinkled than I’d imagined—a stark contrast with the smooth white fabric he was bundled in.

“He’s so small,” I murmured. Then I looked at Kaori, and her big brown eyes met mine. I wanted to say more, but the words wouldn’t come. My lips moved helplessly. Something hot welled up in my chest.

She was the same woman she’d been yesterday, and yet she felt different somehow. The love of my life had changed permanently. She was no longer just Kaori but the mother of my child.

“Thank you.” The gratitude came naturally to my lips. I put an arm around her shoulders and pressed my cheek to her forehead. “You did great... He’s so precious.”

She held out the swaddled baby with a bashful smile. “Wanna hold him?”

“Oh...o-okay.” Hesitantly, I took him into my arms. “Whoa...”

The newborn baby, unable to even lift his own head at this point, was practically weightless. He was so soft that he almost didn’t feel human. But I could feel his life force, and his tiny, doll-like limbs were wriggling. My child was alive, right there in my arms, and it was my duty to protect him.

I guess I really am a father now, I mused, but it didn’t quite feel real. Unlike Kaori, who had just experienced the violent tumult of childbirth, there was no climactic event dividing my pre-baby and post-baby selves. I would have to consciously behave differently from now on.

“I wonder what kind of person he’ll be. I can’t wait to find out.” I touched his

hand with my finger, and he grasped it. I smiled.

“Well, he’s definitely gonna be a bookworm,” Kaori grinned.

“You’d better not force it on him,” I warned her with a knowing smile. “He’s allowed to have his own interests.”

“I know, I know!” She giggled and then suddenly looked up. “Hey, Seigen-san! You should come hold him too!”

“Well, I...er...”

Until that moment, Seigen had merely been watching from a respectful distance, and I could feel his uncertainty. He was probably still thinking about the conversation we’d just had. / certainly was. I couldn’t decide if he had the right to hold my kid.

“Uh, you see...”

He snuck a glance at me, then let out a breath. I could tell from the look on his face that he was trying to get out of it. *What the hell?* For some reason, it bothered me. Part of me didn’t accept him as the grandfather of my son, yet another part of me wanted him to give my son the love he was owed. The two opposing sides were at war with each other in my heart.

“Oh dear.” Kaori’s eyes widened, and a moment later, her face lit up cheerfully. “C’mon, there’s no need to be shy! Right, *Grandpa*? Get over here! Freshly born baby, piping hot! It’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see what he looks like!”

“What...?”

“See how he looks like a little monkey? By tomorrow, he’ll seem a bit more human. Isn’t that wild? This is a rare opportunity!”

“Did you just call your own son a monkey...?”

“Hee hee hee! C’mon, step right up!”

“Er...all right...”

He could clearly tell that she wasn’t going to take no for an answer. Caving under the pressure of her sales pitch, he reluctantly came closer. She took the

baby from my arms and held him out to his grandfather.

“Oh, uh...what should I do?”

“Hold him in the crook of your arm and support him with one hand under his head... Yeah, just like that.”

“Wait, but...he’s so limp and squishy... Are you sure I’m doing this right...?”

“Yup, you’re doing great!”

My father gazed down at his grandson, his expression stiff and uncertain. The baby was sleeping soundly, his little hand clenching and unclenching.

“Wow...” Seigen exhaled, then looked up at us. His caramel eyes were blurred with tears. “He looks just like Suimei did when he was born.”

“He what?” I shot back, eyes wide. This man had just finished telling me how he’d never wanted me to be born, so how would he recall what I looked like back then?

He frowned at me before looking back at my son. “Is it really that surprising? I *am* technically your father, you know. After you were born, Midori called me in to see you. Of course, I never held you like this—I only looked at you from a distance—but...damn it, I should have.” A shining tear trickled from his eye. “All these years, I never knew how soft and warm babies could be... If only I’d known, I...”

Never would have done what I did. At least, I assumed that was how he meant to finish the sentence, but instead he swallowed his words and grimaced down at his grandson. I wasn’t sure what to think of this, and so silence fell between us once more. As I agonized over how to make peace with the past, the only option was to join him in admiring the baby.

“Well, you’ll have lots of chances to hold our son!”

It was Kaori, naturally, who broke the silence. She smiled from ear to ear as she looked directly at my father, without an ounce of hesitation in her eyes. She seemed to accept Seigen as the grandfather of our child.

“When it comes to a loving family, the more the merrier! Honestly, I’m jealous. I never got to have any grandparents.” She looked at me with a smile

that suggested she knew exactly how I was feeling. “You agree with me, right, Suimei?” she asked, tugging on my sleeve. “It’s a rare gift to have someone be part of your life—you could even call it a miracle. Because far too often, those attempts don’t work out.”

I could feel desperation in her rapid-fire torrent of words. Panic was visible on her face, as if she wanted to seize every last opportunity and leave none behind. Right...because the people she’d wanted to spend her life with had all left her, one by one. Her birth parents, her foster father Shinonome...she had cherished them from the bottom of her heart, but they’d traveled to the great beyond before she could repay them for the love they’d shown her. She clearly didn’t want our child to go through the same thing she had.

I blinked in surprise for a moment, looked at my father standing there in confusion, turned to my son, and then...slumped my shoulders. “Yeah, I’m fine with it if you are.”

Her face lit up at this. “Yay! I knew you’d understand!” She gave me a big hug and patted me on the head.

“Wh-whoa there, knock it off! Not in front of Seigen!”

“Hee hee hee hee... I can’t help it! You’ve worked so hard!”

As I started to blush, she gazed back at me in high spirits, like she could see exactly what I was wrestling with... I let out a sigh. *I guess mothers know best.* With a stiff smile, I turned to face my father.

I had hated my abuser with a fiery passion...and at the same time, I feared him. He had tried to wreak havoc in the spirit realm for his own gain, and to this day I still felt conflicted toward him because of it. Though I understood his reasons, that didn’t make it any easier to compartmentalize. I was only human, after all.

But...if he was willing to love my kid...maybe I could take one small step toward compromise.

“I hope you’ll look out for us and our son...Dad.”

I heard him suck in a breath. “Y-yes, of course...! Gladly, Suimei!”

As he smiled at me through his tears, a strange emotion roared to life in the depths of my heart and seared my chest. Unable to bear it, I turned and looked through the window at the piles of fallen leaves outside. Once the trees were bare, winter would come. The seasons marched on regardless of how I felt. But one day...in the not-so-distant future...perhaps I could smile back at him.

“Waahh!”

“Ah! Oh no! He’s crying, he’s crying! What do I do?!”

“Oh dear. Let me see him...”

Listening to my father’s voice as he began to panic, I let my imagination run wild with thoughts of tomorrow.

Chapter 5: Old Enough

UGH, NOT AGAIN!

In late autumn, around the time winter's ghost appeared on the horizon, the main street was bustling with spirits. It was here that my little sister Haruka decided to drop a bombshell on me.

"Since Mama's got morning sickness, what if we deliver the books instead? I bet she'd really like that! But it has to be a secret so we can surprise her!"

She thrust her skewered goheimochi skyward like a sword. If she were a legendary hero, a beam of light would shoot out from the tip, piercing the heavens, and they'd call it the Gohei Blade... *Nope, still sounds dumb.* Maybe if it were mitarashi dango...

"Uh, hello? Onii-chan? Are you listening to me?!"

"Eeek!" As I was lost in my own little world, she poked my side, and it tickled so much that I hopped like a rabbit. "Nnnn...I keep telling you not to tickle me..."

"Hmph, big deal! Act like a man already!" she yelled, swinging her mochi around. What was she so worked up about? Her priorities made no sense.

At the age of eight, Haruka was younger than me by two years. Her brown hair was tied up in pigtails, and she had big, round eyes like Mom's. Her favorite thing to wear was a pair of denim overalls, and you'd think she was a boy if her hair were shorter. Personality-wise, she was a free spirit who followed her heart wherever it took her, and she got along well with Uncle Ginme.

Whenever she plunged headfirst into something without thinking it through, Dad would say she was "just like her mother," but I disagreed. Mom's antics always had a really good reason behind them; Haruka's, on the other hand, did not. She would cause trouble for everyone simply because she felt like it, and I was always stuck cleaning up her messes.

As for me, Yorutsuki... Unlike my mega-tomboy sister, I was the quiet type. People told me I was the living image of my father when he was younger, except for my black hair. Instead of going outside to play, I preferred to read or outline a new story draft. Why wear myself out when I could just stay home? And personally, I liked Uncle Kinme better.

Alas, I barely had any time to read in peace with my sister barreling around like a runaway freight train. She was always telling me to “act like a man,” but what did that even mean? Get buff like Uncle Ginme? *Dream on! My biggest muscle is my brain!*

Backstory aside, I had a bad feeling about this, and I needed to stop her.

“Where’d you get this idea all of a sudden? Didn’t Mom say we need to be on our best behavior right now? Besides, the grown-ups are running the store. We’re not old enough to help,” I explained calmly, adjusting my glasses.

“Nnngh... Yeah, but...” Confronted by my logic, she began to squirm.

Our mom ran a bookstore in the spirit realm. It was founded by Kyokutei Bakin who was succeeded by Shinonome, and now Mom represented the third generation of ownership. It hadn’t gotten a lot of customers in the past, but thanks to Mom’s hard work, the store was swarming with spirits every day now. Over the past few months, though, her condition had gotten so bad that she kept having to close the store. She was pregnant with a little brother or sister for us, and the so-called morning sickness was kicking her butt.

Moms sure are amazing, huh? If having a baby made me puke every day, I’d have given up after the first one. But I digress...

I jabbed my finger in Haruka’s face. “Look, I know you’re worried about Mom, but causing trouble is only going to make things harder for her. What we need to focus on is our *schoolwork*. Did you finish yours?”

“Urk...! Uh, y-yeah! Kinda!”

“Oh, reeeally?”

The two of us went to a private elementary school run by spirits. Unlike me with my perfect grades, Haruka struggled with classroom learning and seemed better suited to running around outside, like some kind of meathead jock.

“...Nnnn...”

She gave a quiet whimper, her face as red as a tomato, and I quickly braced myself. This was the telltale sign of an incoming—

“Oh, shut UP, you stupid coward! All we have to do is make sure we don’t mess up, so quit making EXCUSES!”

“Guh!”

Her fist sank into my solar plexus. *That hurts, dang it! No hitting!* My vision went blurry, and I doubled over in agony.

“I...I thought it through this time, okay?! This is what’s best for Mom! She said she wanted to get those books delivered, but she can’t do it...so I wanna HELP!” she shouted through her sobs. She clutched at her overalls with her little hands, her tears like crystals of emotion.

“Hmmm...” Now I wasn’t sure how to feel.

Like a needy little baby, Haruka was always glued to Mom, whether it was bedtime or even bath time. But lately I had noticed her giving Mom space and trying not to be a burden when she was already struggling with morning sickness. I was proud of her for trying so hard to be a big girl, even though she desperately wanted Mom’s attention.

In a clumsy way, her eagerness to help was an expression of her love for Mom. She just didn’t have a firm grasp on what she was actually able to do... you know, typical little sister stuff. Maybe she was growing up, though. The more experience she gained, the more independent she would become... *Good grief. Fine, you win!*

“Okay, you have a point. I mean, you’re not the only one who wants to help Mom while she’s sick.”

“Huh? You mean it, Onii-chan?” One second she was crying, and the next her eyes were sparkling with joy. “Then let’s help her together by delivering books!”

I slumped my shoulders in defeat. “All right, I’ll come with you. Happy?”

“YAY!”

It seemed I was destined to end up as an accomplice to her schemes. Well, as

the older brother, I was glad to help my baby sister grow. Besides, our friends from school were all old enough to help out with *their* family chores. Surely delivering books wouldn't be that hard.

However...there was one major obstacle in front of us.

"Delivering books is a really good idea. Like you said, I think Mom would like it. The problem is that all the customers live in the human world. How are we supposed to get there?"

"Urk...!" She grimaced.

We couldn't travel from the spirit realm to the human world without passing through hell. But guards were posted at every entrance, both to keep young spirits from wandering in and to keep the dead from breaking out. So if we waltzed in, they'd kick us right back out again. Last time we tried to sneak in, we got caught in seconds flat.

"Even if we *did* make it through hell, we don't know how to get around in the human world either. We're sure to get lost. How are we going to find our customers? They all live in places like the mountains in the middle of nowhere!"

With new scientific discoveries every year, spirits were gradually being driven out of the human world. Those who remained ended up in remote locations. Mom could get to them just fine by riding Nyaa-san, but we would be on foot. It just wasn't realistic.

"...Then what if we ask someone like Nyaa-san to take us there?"

"You think that cat will go to all that effort for us?"

"Nnngh! No, she's not that nice to us..."

Mom's best friend Nyaa-san rarely ever left her side. She was blunt and rude, and I couldn't begin to count the number of times she'd made me cry. Mom liked to say Nyaa-san was "just a big tsundere," but I knew better. She only cared about Mom and held literally everything else in contempt. If it was true that cats ranked the people of their household, we were surely at the bottom. So if we went to her for help, she'd say...

"How stupid are you? Just behave yourselves, you brats. So obnoxious..."

The mental image made my stomach hurt.

“Let’s forget about Nyaa-san.”

“Yeah, maybe we should.”

It looked like my sister had reached the same conclusion. But what were we going to do now? How could we achieve our goal without Nyaa-san?

“Even if we *could* travel to the human world on our own, we’d look suspicious. If they see two kids all by themselves, they’ll think we’re runaways, and at that point it’s game over—they’ll take us to the cops! Besides, what if we got kidnapped? I hear the human world is full of bad people like that.”

“So, you’re saying we need a spirit that looks like a grown-up human?”

“Yeah, we need someone as a chaperone, especially to get us through hell. But who can we ask? Grandma Noname? No, she’s way too overprotective...”

“Yeah, she’ll just stop us. The other day when Mom sent me to the store by myself, Grandma got so scared that she started crying.”

“It’s nice that she cares about us, but it’s kind of a lot, isn’t it?”

Grandma Noname was Mom’s mom...er, foster mom. She was a warm, loving person, and she was family to us. The only downside was that she was so clingy, she was an even bigger baby than we were! If she found out about our idea, she’d put a stop to it for sure.

“Ummm...what about Uncle Ginme?”

“He left on a training pilgrimage last week. I don’t think he’s back yet.”

“Well, there’s Uncle Kinme...but I doubt he’d help us in the first place. And Dad’s busy at the apothecary...”

It’s no use. I can’t think of anyone!

As kids, we were powerless. The whole plan was too wild; the most realistic “gift” we could give Mom was a free massage coupon. But I wasn’t sure that would be enough to satisfy Haruka...

“Hey, what’s goin’ on, you two?” Just then, our serious discussion was interrupted by a jarringly upbeat voice. We turned to find a pair of

pomegranate-red eyes looking at us. “Some kinda problem? Maybe I can solve it!”

It was Dad’s partner Kuro, wagging his tail happily, his red eyes a striking contrast with his jet-black fur. His long torso and short, stubby legs always made me think of a dachshund.

“Long time no see. Hope you’ve been well.”

Beside Kuro, a red-eyed young man bowed gracefully. He was a handsome guy dressed in a blend of Eastern and Western fashion, with an unzipped hoodie over a navy-blue pongee silk kimono, his half-width obi affixed by a leather belt. This was Akamadara, Grandpa Seigen’s familiar.

“Glad to see you again, sir,” I greeted him shyly. A split second later, a horrible realization set in, and I looked over at my sister...

“EEEEEEEE! Akamadara-san! Long time no see!” Squealing with joy, she leapt into his arms.

“My, my. I see you’re full of energy as always, Haruka-san.” He smiled softly and accepted her embrace without a trace of discomfort.

Ugh, she practically has hearts in her eyes... I can’t bear to watch...

My little sister had a big crush on Akamadara, and she was so obvious that it gave me secondhand embarrassment. Watching her fawn over him was excruciating every time. For the record, *no*, I wasn’t jealous of some other guy “stealing” my sister. He could have her for all I cared. But still...

I watched out of the corner of my eye as he lowered Haruka back to the ground. Then he knelt on the spot, seemingly unconcerned about getting his clothes dirty, and pressed his free hand to his chest. “By the way, Master Kuro, is this all you wanted to buy today?” Dangling from his other hand was a shopping bag that evidently belonged to Kuro.

A handsome young man who looked like a fashion model, kneeling before a dog... Not gonna lie, it was a bizarre sight.

“Yup yup! Thanks for tagging along, Akamadara!”

“In that case, I shall bring it to the house for you.”

“Huh? No, no, no. I can carry it from here.”

Suddenly, Akamadara’s entire manner changed dramatically, and his eyes flew open. “*No!* It would be an outrage to make you carry it, Master!” he shouted, clearly agitated. “Please, allow me to preserve my honor as your disciple. Please! You *must* allow me!”

“Eeeh! Okay, okay! Just quit screaming!” Kuro tucked his tail between his legs and began to shake; Akamadara saw this and nodded in satisfaction.

This guy was obsessed with Kuro. His impassioned gaze noticed no one else. Though he conducted himself modestly when speaking as a servant of Grandpa Seigen, he seemed to lose his composure whenever Kuro was involved. As such, he wasn’t even *remotely* interested in my sister, which meant she was destined for heartbreak. As her big brother, that made me really sad.

“Haahh... He’s just so cool...”

As she swooned and blushed, I quietly let out a sigh. *Poor thing*. Then I realized Kuro had walked up to me. When our eyes met, he cocked his head. “So anyway, what’s got you two in a bind?”

Dad’s Inugami buddy was sweet and precious, and I loved him dearly. After having to put up with Nyaa-san and her fickle whims, I couldn’t imagine how *anyone* could like cats! Without a doubt, I was a dog person.

“Well, you see, Kuro...”

Scratching behind his ears, I explained our situation: Haruka wanted to help Mom, but we had no way of getting to the human world, and we were starting to think we just weren’t old enough.

“You wanna help her? Wow, that’s really sweet of ya!” His eyes sparkled as his tail wagged vigorously. “I know for sure Kaori would love that! Hey, let me help too!”

“What? You mean it?”

“Yeah, I wanna do something nice for her while this morning sickness has her down!”

I love dogs so much!!! They don’t look at you with contempt, they don’t

scratch you out of nowhere, they don't hiss—they're just nice!

His words were a soothing balm on my heart. Plus, I'd heard that he used to live in the human world, so he probably knew his way around.

"Glad to have you!" I replied, smiling from ear to ear. Surely Haruka would agree...

"Wait a minute, Onii-chan. Kuro can't help us. Remember how you said they'll think we're runaways? Well, they *definitely* will if we have a dog!"

"Gah!" Kuro's cuteness had distracted me from that crucial detail. *Keep your cool, Yorutsuki!* "She's right, Kuro. Sorry... Thanks for the offer, though."

"Darn..." Kuro's ears drooped sadly.

But then the hand of salvation was extended to us by the last person I would've expected. "Then why don't I join you as well?"

"What?!"

It was Akamadara, his smile bewitchingly beautiful and his poise flawless as he bowed to us. "From what I've heard so far, you need someone who looks like an adult, do you not? Good thing my master saw fit to give me this gallant form. I believe it would be suitable."

"I mean, yeah, but...are you sure? We don't want Grandpa to find out."

Grandpa Seigen was as overprotective as the rest of them. He definitely wouldn't want his grandkids to visit the human world by themselves. And since Akamadara was his familiar, I'd assumed no secrets could be kept between them.

But Akamadara smirked, pressing a long, slender finger to his lips in a mischievous shushing gesture. "That won't be an issue. I have been ordered to act as befits the situation at hand, and I am free to decide whether or not to report back to him."

"Wow, he must really trust you."

"I am a smart dog, after all."

Dogs really are the best!

Like Kuro, Akamadara was an Inugami. With them on our team, maybe we could go to the human world after all! Quivering faintly with excitement, I looked over at Haruka. She returned my gaze, her face flushed.

“Onii-chan!”

“Haruka!”

My heart was racing with thoughts of the fun adventure in store for us, so I tried not to get carried away. This was serious business. My sister could goof around like a little kid all she wanted, but I needed to be the mature one.

“...Ahem. Well then, let’s head home for today and plan our trip. We’ll need to decide which customers we’re delivering to.”

“Good idea!” Haruka chimed in, eagerly raising both hands. “We gotta pack supplies too. Like candy! Or candy! Or maybe even some candy!”

Kuro and Akamadara smiled stiffly as she made her priorities known.

“Haruka’s such a little glutton...”

“My, my. This is starting to sound like a picnic.”

I looked around at everyone. “Okay, we’ll be in touch. I’ll send a letter!” And so, we parted ways.

On the walk home, Haruka took my hand and grinned. “Gosh, I can’t wait! I hope it’ll make Mom happy...”

“I’m sure it will...probably.”

I could feel myself smiling too. Who would’ve thought my sister’s harebrained idea would start to sound like so much fun? Maybe babysitting her wasn’t so bad sometimes.

Or so I thought. But I didn’t have the slightest clue of what we were about to get ourselves into...

The rental ledger was a little book where all our borrowing records were kept. It listed book titles, dates, customer names, and advance reservations. That way, if someone wanted to borrow a book that was currently rented out, we’d

let them know as soon as it was available again.

Our bookstore served the entire nation of Japan, thanks to the previous owner—Shinonome, I think—who'd worked to expand our market. Naturally, we had customers in the most remote locations, and we offered deliveries to those who couldn't leave their home for some reason or another, like if they were mountain gods, for instance. Those were the customers we wanted to visit.

I waited until no one was around, then swiped the ledger—an easy job, since Mom was laid up in bed. Unlike my sister, I was the “good kid” in our family, and the guilty thrill made my heart pound.

“Find anything, Onii-chan?”

“One sec...” As I combed through the ledger, I found a few deliveries waiting to be made. The customers had already paid in advance, so all we needed to do was bring them their books. “Okay, first we need all the books we’re taking with us. Can you help me?”

“Sure thing!”

I jotted down all the titles we needed, then started hunting through the store to find them. Since my little assistant didn't know a lot of big words, I gave her the easy ones. Admittedly, I liked giving her instructions and watching her dutifully follow them. *If only she were this well behaved all the time*, I thought wistfully as we worked.

Just then, I felt an intense stare and whipped around to look.

“The hell are you kids up to?”

“Oh...hi, Nyaa-san... Didn't know you were awake...”

Standing there was the world's most temperamental black cat. Despair washed over me. *I thought she was sleeping on the porch!*

She eyed us dubiously, her tails swishing. “Are you plotting some kind of mischief? If you give Kaori even the *slightest* extra hassle,” she hissed, baring her sharp fangs, “I'll bite you both!”

“EEEK!”

We trembled, knowing full well she wasn't just bluffing. She was the kind of cat who wasn't afraid to get her claws dirty. If she decided to bite us, there would be no talking her out of it!

"We...we're just looking for books to read! No mischief! Right, Haruka?"

"Right, right! Autumn is reading season, so we wanted to read!"

As we blurted out the first excuse that came to mind, Nyaa-san squinted suspiciously at us. "I believe it coming from *you*, Yorutsuki, but your sister hardly ever reads anything."

"That's not true! I read books sometimes! I even have a favorite!" Haruka protested, puffing her cheeks.

Nyaa-san sighed heavily at this. "Either way, Kaori is having a very tough time. Do me a favor and don't cause any trouble." With that, she turned away and stalked off into the living room.

Once she was gone, we breathed a sigh of relief.

"Man, I thought she was on to us...!"

"That was a close one, Onii-chan!"

Somehow, we'd made it through by the skin of our teeth.

"Why does she only ever care about Mom, anyway? It makes me so mad!"

"Quiet, Haruka! She'll hear you!"

"I can't help it!" she grumbled.

To be fair, I understood how she felt. Nyaa-san lived under the same roof as us, so it wouldn't kill her to be a little nicer!

"Forget about her. We gotta hurry or we'll be late."

"Okaaay..."

I stuffed the books into my backpack along with my New Year's allowance, in case we needed money in an emergency. Then I clipped on my waist pouch, a hand-me-down from Dad with a certain something inside. *I just hope I don't have to use it.* I gave it a little pat, then picked up the heavy backpack.

“Time to go, Haruka!” I called to my sister, who was dragging something out from the other side of the store.

“Comiiing!” she yelled back cheerfully. She finally appeared with an oversized backpack slung over her shoulders.

“What’s in there? Don’t tell me it’s all candy,” I said with a withered look.

She thrust out her chest proudly. “Nope, it’s candy *and* my good-luck charm.”

I rolled my eyes. *Don’t come crying to me if it gets too heavy partway through.*
“Fine, whatever. We gotta go!”

“Okay!”

Together, we left the store. But right before we closed the door, we called into the empty building:

“Be back soon, Mom!”

“We’re gonna do our best, we promise!”

Then the two of us took off running. At last, we were old enough for our first adventure—no, our first job!

Book delivery turned out to be more thrilling than I’d ever imagined.

After we met up with Kuro and Akamadara, our first destination was Cape Tappi in Aomori Prefecture. Sadly, the weather was cloudy with harsh wind. When we arrived, I could hardly believe my eyes: a jet-black giant was sitting in the middle of the stormy sea.

“Well now, if it isn’t an adorable pair of kids! Need me for something?”

He was crying for some reason, and his tears were the size of basketballs. Nevertheless, I decided to introduce myself. “Um...we’re here from the spirit realm bookstore...”

Instantly, his face lit up like the sun. “Does that mean...you’re Kaori’s children?!”

“Aaaaaaaaahhh!”

A gigantic hand scooped us up. I was terrified he was going to crush us to death, but he simply gazed down at us in his palm. “Your mom’s told me all about you. I always hoped I’d get to meet you someday! My name is Kurokami.”

“Uh...hi...I’m Sh-Shirai Yorutsuki...”

“And I’m Haruka!”

Kurokami grinned at us, his tears seeping into the ocean. “I can’t believe I’ve met three whole generations of your family now! What an honor. Blowing these winds has been truly worthwhile.”

“What?” I frowned in confusion.

But he simply shook his head. “Never mind. Oh, I almost forgot...I assume you brought me the book I requested?”

“Ah, yes! Let’s see... Here it is. *Shayou* by Dazai Osamu.”

“Yes, that one!”

“You’re a Dazai fan?”

He smiled. “That’s right. I’ve been reading all of Dazai Osamu’s works in the order they were published, and I’m nearly caught up. Crazy, huh? Your mom recommended him to me. I was never interested in reading before that, but once I gave it a try, I got hooked.”

Whoa! Nice going, Mom! “I-I’m actually a big fan of Dazai myself! My favorite is *Hashire Melos*!” In my excitement, my voice went up an octave.

Kurokami nodded along, his eyes twinkling warmly. “That one hooked me from the very first line: ‘Melos was enraged.’ I like it too.”

Joy welled up in my chest. That exact line was my favorite part as well! “And you know what else? I—”

“Hold it!”

Before I could gush about my love for Dazai Osamu, my sister stopped me—and right as I was going to talk about story composition and the peculiarities of word choice in modern Japanese literature!

“What is it?” I shot back, annoyed. Then I realized she was scowling.

“Could you save it for some other time? You’re gonna drag this on for hours.”

“Nnngh... What do you care? We Dazai fans have a lot to discuss!”

“But we still have a bunch of deliveries to make! And whenever you talk about books, you lose track of everything else, just like Mom!”

“Wha?!” I was left speechless. *Just like Mom? As if! I’m nowhere near as cool as her!* That said, perhaps I *was* getting a little carried away. Clearing my throat, I began to dig through my backpack. “Um, could you sign this receipt?”

“Of course.”

I held out a pen, and Kurokami reached out with fingers as large as tree trunks. From his perspective, it was smaller than a toothpick, and yet he gracefully signed his name anyway. Afterward, I grasped his finger with a smile.

“Thank you for confirming your delivery. If you need anything else, get in touch with us at the spirit realm bookstore!”

I bowed, and Haruka followed suit after a moment. “Th-thank you!”

“Any time!” In the next instant, a powerful gale whipped up around us, scattering the blanket of dark clouds above until only a clear blue sky remained. “I look forward to your next visit, young man. Hopefully we’ll have time for a nice, long chat!”

“Yeah!” I nodded with a smile.

Blown in the wind, his tears sparkled like jewels in the sunshine.

After that, we delivered books left and right.

When we brought *The Tale of Genji* to the Killing Stone in Tochigi Prefecture, I thought I was a goner for sure. The eccentric Tamamo-no-Mae took one look at me and said, “Well now, what an adorable little boy we have here. Alas, you have a long way to go before you’re my type. For now, would you be the Murasaki to my Genji?”

At first, I didn’t know what she meant, so I just stared back at her. Murasaki was the name of the young girl whom Hikaru Genji raised and later married

after his first wife Aoi passed away. So Tamamo-no-Mae was going to raise me... and then...? The moment it clicked, my face burned bright red. “No! I-I-I...I’m saving myself for someone I love!”

“Ho ho ho ho ho ho! Such innocence. How precious!”

“Onii-chan, you should see your face right now!”

The two girls laughed their heads off, but I was furious. As a boy, I was supposed to be the provider, not the provided-for!

In any case, the deliveries were going smoothly. My sister rode on the back of Akamadara’s beast form while I sat on a supersized Kuro, a form he apparently had recently gained through training. What could be faster than two Inugami? *Bullet trains, eat your heart out!*

We traveled all over Japan, and our once-heavy backpacks had lightened up considerably by the time the sun began to set. We hadn’t met with any problems either. *So far, so good!*

As it turned out, bookstore work wasn’t that hard at all. On the contrary, it was a piece of cake...or did we simply have a natural talent for it? When I suggested this to Kuro, his eyes lit up. “Well, you *do* love books just as much as Kaori. Maybe it’s your calling!”

This was exactly what I wanted to hear. *Heh heh heh... My calling, huh? Gosh, I hope so.* As we continued the deliveries, I started to feel more and more confident—until eventually we were down to the very last one.

Our final delivery brought us to the Ise Grand Shrine in Ise City, Mie Prefecture. And that was where our smooth sailing came to an end.

“Look, look! It says this street is called Okage Yokochō!” Haruka shouted excitedly.

“Wow, there’re so many people! And so many stores!” Kuro yelled along with her.

“No kidding... I’m surprised there are still this many visitors so late in the day,” Akamadara mused.

Before us sprawled Okage Yokochō, an alley brimming with tourists and shrine-goers. It was a five-minute walk from the Uji Bridge in the Inner Shrine, and it boasted around fifty of the same stores that had first opened to serve shrine visitors back in the Edo period. Featuring landmark architecture relocated from the Ise-ji Route, it was a vibrant historical attraction. Crowds of people paraded down the street after their shrine visit, peering into the shops as they went.

But while my sister was having a great time, I was not. My head was spinning, and I felt sick to my stomach. Everything was such a blur that I could barely keep standing. I knew right away that this was no ordinary illness; after all, I had felt just fine before we arrived. The source of my affliction...was the massive swarm of humans.

“Gah hah hah hah hah! Whatever that is looks amazing!”

“Say, wanna stop somewhere after we’re done?”

All around me, I could hear unfamiliar voices. The passersby all looked identical to me, with dark hair and Western-style clothing. Where were their horns? Where were the creatures who looked like animals or inanimate objects? These people all had the same skin color too—no red or blue—and they were all walking on the ground, even though the sky was right there for the taking. And their *smells*! Deodorant, perfume, and other chemicals mixed with the smoke from the food stalls and tormented my nose.

Ugh, I can’t take it! I dropped to the ground in the middle of the street.

“Onii-chan?” Haruka peered down at me in concern. “You okay?”

I couldn’t find the energy to speak, so I just nodded back silently. Furrowing her brow, she grabbed my hand and tugged me along.

“H-Haruka? Where are we going?”

“You’re white as a sheet, so we’re taking a break, duh! Right, Akamadara-san?”

“Good idea. Right this way.”

Akamadara led us to a dining area near the souvenir shop with table seating

and raised tatami platforms. I staggered over and flopped down onto the tatami.

“Wait right there!” Haruka told me as she dashed off.

“You okay, kid?” Kuro asked sympathetically while I gasped for breath.

“I...I hope so,” I answered feebly.

“You’re just a little crowd-sick, that’s all,” Akamadara explained as he took my shoes off for me. “With some rest, it’ll go away in no time.”

“Okay,” I nodded as I slumped forward over the table.

Meanwhile, I cursed myself for being so blind. I didn’t know I’d get crowd-sick! Why was I the only one with this problem when my little sister was fine? Pathetic! And here I thought this line of work was “my calling”? If I couldn’t handle crowds, I wouldn’t be able to visit the human world to give out and restock our selection!

“I’m such a baby,” I grumbled in spite of myself.

Kuro gave me a little lick on the cheek. “Hey, cheer up! It’s no big deal!”

Dogs are so sweet... I love them so much...

Then my sister returned.

“I’m back!” She was carrying a large tray with a bowl of hot, steaming udon noodles. “I’ll bet you’re hungry, huh? This is called Ise udon, and it’s the specialty here! Let’s eat before we do our last delivery!”

I could see thick noodles garnished with green onions, sitting in a small amount of thick, potent broth that looked more like a dipping sauce.

“I’m too tired...” Yes, I was hungry, but I couldn’t muster the energy to eat.

That was when Haruka went berserk.

“GROW UP! Quit your whining and EAT IT!”

“MMMPGHH!”

The next thing I knew, my eyes were bulging out of my skull as she stuffed my mouth full of udon. But before I could get mad at her, the sweet and salty flavor

caught my attention.

“Mm... This is good...!”

This particular type of udon was extra soft and lacked the springiness of the more common Sanuki variety. As I chewed the noodles, they broke apart in my mouth, and the sweet dashi sauce paired perfectly with the taste of the wheat flour. Plus, the only topping was green onion—simple and easy on the stomach, which was exactly what I needed after the smell of humans made me queasy. Once I swallowed my first bite, my vision stopped spinning. Evidently my sickness had partly been caused by running on fumes.

“Weird...I feel better now,” I said, blinking in surprise.

“Knew you would,” Haruka smiled proudly. “Ise udon was invented to feed people who traveled from really far away to see the shrine. It’s boiled for an extra-long time, so it’s good for digestion! That’s why I thought it’d be perfect for you. Now eat!” She thrust a pair of chopsticks into my hands. “You’ve been nervous all day today. Just relax for a bit!”

As she beamed at me, I felt my face flush. I’d been so preoccupied with everything else that I’d somehow failed to notice my own fatigue...to the point that I needed my eight-year-old sister to look after me. *How pathetic... I’ll never be a good big brother at this rate...* Slumping my shoulders, I took another bite of udon.

Haruka was acting like Mom, and it made me feel strange. But since they were both free spirits who followed their hearts, the resemblance was undeniable. I needed to pull myself together and stop being such a wussy little baby around her so I could prove that I was an equally worthy heir to the bookstore!

I sat up straight. My newfound resolve seemed to cure me of my symptoms. “Thanks, Haruka. How much did it cost? I’ll pay you back.”

“It wasn’t much, so don’t worry about it! I’ve still got some money.”

But this kind gesture made me grimace. “Oh no you don’t! If I don’t pay you back now, you’ll lord it over me for ages!”

I could picture her using it as an excuse whenever I got upset at her: *Is this*

any way to treat me after I was so nice to you that one time? I really didn't want to owe her anything.

"Seriously, it's fine," she pouted in response to my stubborn refusal. Then an idea struck her, and her lips curled in a grin. "But if you *insist*...there's something I'd like to eat."

Her eyes were sparkling. I could see the red flags, but I nodded anyway. "Uh... okay, sure. Name it...unless it's at some super-fancy restaurant," I cautioned.

"Of course not," she replied, her smile widening. "Don't worry, it's not at a sit-down place! It's right over there!"

To-go food isn't that expensive, I thought to myself as I looked where she was pointing. But then I saw the price tag and quickly learned just how wrong I was.

"Matsusaka beef skewer...variety pack?!" I shouted, unable to stop myself. It was *three thousand yen*! "Isn't that kind of insane for a few bites of beef on a stick?!"

"We're talking about the one and only Matsusaka beef," Haruka snorted. "Of course it's going to be expensive. Good thing *you're* the one paying for it! Meat, meat, meat!"

She threw her hands into the air in celebration, and I could feel a headache coming on. *That's practically my whole allowance!* Tearfully, I gazed into my wallet. Sure enough, I could afford it, but just barely. "I was saving up to buy new books, dang it...!"

"Woo-hoo! You're the best, Onii-chan!"

I handed over the money like it was my last breath, and she gleefully skipped off to the skewer stand. I couldn't bear to witness my entire savings being traded off for meat, so I turned away. Then I noticed Kuro and Akamadara looking intently at each other, their expressions dead serious.

"Go on, Master Kuro! These are for you!"

"No, I...I can't... Suimei doesn't let me eat fatty meat..."

Placed at Kuro's feet was a paper plate piled high with Matsusaka beef skewers. A shining strand of drool dangled from his mouth as he struggled to

tear his eyes away from the meat. It was plainly obvious that he was holding himself back.

But Akamadara showed no mercy. “Then we won’t tell him. What happens in Ise stays in Ise,” he replied with a bright, unwavering smile. “I’d like to take the opportunity to treat you to a tasty meal!”

Truly it was a demonic temptation.

“Nnnnn...”

“Your resistance is futile. I assure you, Suimei-sama will never find out.”

“Hnnnnnnnn! *Stoppp!* Don’t tempt meeee!”

“All I want is to see the joy on your face as you eat it!”

Akamadara’s love must be suffocating, I thought to myself as I polished off my Ise udon.

After that hearty meal, I was feeling like myself again. I still wasn’t used to big crowds of humans, but I had a job to do: the final delivery. “Okay, everybody, let’s go to the Ise Grand Shrine!”

“You’d better not get sick again,” my sister teased.

“Oh, be quiet!” I scoffed. She took one look at me and cackled.

Unlike in summer, the autumn sun was quick to set. Though it wasn’t really that late in the evening, a veil of twilight was already descending upon us, casting a tinge of red over our surroundings. Beneath the burning scarlet sun, the word *gloaming* felt apt indeed. We’d originally planned to be back home in the spirit realm by now, but then I’d caused us to make an unexpected pit stop... *Let’s get this over with and go straight home*, I vowed to myself as we walked.

“...Yorutsuki-kun, are you going straight to the Inner Shrine?” Akamadara asked, stopping us as we were about to cross the Uji Bridge.

When I turned back, I saw a hint of uncertainty on his handsome features and cocked my head. “Yeah, that’s the plan. Why do you ask?”

He furrowed his brow. "My master has always said that one must follow the proper procedure when paying a visit to the realm of gods."

"The proper procedure?" I repeated.

"In this case, tradition dictates that we pass through the Outer Shrine first. I don't think we should deviate from that."

Haruka and I exchanged a glance. We didn't understand why Akamadara was so dead-set on tradition.

"Well, we're not here to *visit*, just to make a delivery, so I don't think it matters."

"Yeah, exactly! We're just bringing them their order!"

I didn't think it applied to us since we were only here on business, but Akamadara didn't seem to agree with me. Frowning, he looked over at Kuro as if he wanted backup; Kuro gazed at me, tail wagging slowly.

"Hmmm. So you don't think it matters?"

"No...?" The question put me on guard, but he ultimately shrugged.

"Then it's probably fine. If anything goes south, I'll protect you!"

"Uhh...okay... Th-thanks..."

"You're welcome!"

He started walking, and I watched him go. *Why did he think he needed to double-check?* A vague feeling of unease lingered in my chest like a bad aftertaste. "Kuro..."

"Hurry up, kids! We gotta get this over with before it gets dark!"

He called out to us with his usual lighthearted cheer. I exchanged another glance with Haruka, then dashed forward to catch up. My footsteps echoed airily against the clean cypress wood, which reminded me that they supposedly rebuilt Uji Bridge every twenty years or so.

Because visiting hours ended at 5 p.m., we were the only people traveling toward the shrine grounds. As we weaved our way through groups of tourists headed home, the fall breeze skated across the Isuzu River, tickling our skin. It

was cold, but not so chilly that we needed a coat. I felt like the Ise weather was cheering us on as we finished our last job of the day.

But the moment we passed through the large, unpainted torii gate, a shudder ran down my spine, and I stopped short.

“What the...?”

I looked all around, but the dusky shrine grounds seemed perfectly ordinary. The trees rustled in the wind as red rays of sunset sparkled vividly over the gravel path. Was my mind just playing tricks on me? Cliché though it was, it genuinely felt like I had stepped through the torii gate into another world. The air felt different...or maybe it was simply that the hustle and bustle of Okage Yokocho had grown distant...

“Onii-chan? Are you feeling sick again?” asked Haruka.

“Wanna rest some more?” Kuro suggested. Even Akamadara was looking at me worriedly.

“No, no, I’m fine!” Smiling, I started walking faster to catch up. *What am I so scared of? C’mon, I can’t keep acting like a baby in front of Haruka!* With my head held high, I took the lead.

At last, the shrine garden came into view. The perfectly trimmed shrubs and pine trees were all bright green, and they cast long shadows over the deserted grounds.

“Onii-chan...” Just then, Haruka clutched my hand, her complexion ashen, her eyes darting restlessly in all directions. “I’m kinda scared,” she whispered, her voice tense.

She, too, could obviously feel that something was off about this place. Normally she was as unstoppable as a runaway train, but in that moment she was just a little girl who needed her big brother to protect her. Hoping to reassure her, I silently grasped her small, sweaty hand in mine. After a while, the sounds of a river came into earshot, and sure enough, we could see it in the distance.

“Look, it’s the river!” I shouted cheerfully, hoping to mask my growing anxiety.

“Wow, it’s so pretty...”

We walked to the waterfront, where the river flowed quietly beside the cobblestone path. The water was so clear that I was tempted to dip my hand in. I had heard that Inner Shrine visitors customarily came here to cleanse their bodies and minds. While I was wondering whether I might spot any fish in the river, Haruka piped up.

“I forget...where are we supposed to meet the customer?”

“Uhhh...” I pulled out the piece of paper onto which I had copied all the info from the ledger. “It’s not very specific. Just says ‘Inner Shrine of Ise Grand Shrine.’”

I had sort of expected the customer to meet us at the entrance, but no one did. Then I realized that Kuro might know, since he was always helping Dad with work stuff. So I turned back to ask my easygoing Inugami friend.

“Hey, Kuro...”

But just then, I froze.

“...Kuro?”

He was nowhere to be seen...and not just him either. Akamadara had also vanished into thin air. The wind whipped up fiercely, rattling the trees hard, like a metaphor for the dread in our hearts.

“Onii-chan...”

My sister moved in close to me. I swallowed hard. Something was about to happen, but I couldn’t let my fear show. I was the older brother, and I needed to protect my sister. The wind blew across the river, grazing the sweat on the back of my neck.

“...Hail, fellow.”

Just then, I heard an unfamiliar voice directly behind us and whirled around. Someone I didn’t recognize was standing nearby. *But I never sensed anyone coming...* Willing my pounding heart to settle down, I switched into observation mode. Judging from the white po coat, lightweight kimono, and black kanmuri cap, he looked like a Shinto priest, but his face was concealed behind a veil.

“Be ye from the spirit realm bookstore?”

He spoke in an archaic fashion, his tone eerily flat. I was feeling intimidated, so I nodded hastily. Though I couldn't see his expression, I could tell he was displeased. *Wh-what did we ever do to you?* This was obviously the customer we were looking for, but I didn't understand what he was upset about.

I exhaled faintly, then inhaled. This was his territory; there was no guarantee of our safety, and worse, our chaperones were gone. We needed to finish up and get out of here now! I pulled his books from my backpack. Each of them involved the Chinese zodiac, including some folklore anthologies. Clearly, he was into astrology.

“Um...h-here are those books you reserved, if you'd like to check.”

My heart jackhammered like crazy as I handed them over. He took them in silence, then stared down through his veil at the title on each cover, one by one...until eventually he froze.

“Not enough,” he muttered.

“Huh?!” I yelped.

“Minakata Kumagusu's *The Twelve Zodiac Beasts: A Study*... Bringeth ye not volume one?”

The blood drained from my face, and I scrabbled through my backpack. But he was right: there was no volume one. I must've forgotten to grab it before we left. “I...I'm so sorry!” I shouted, bowing before him. *Dang it, I thought I double-checked!*

As my heart raced, I fearfully looked up...and in the next instant, I felt my blood run cold.

The man had swelled to twice his previous size, and he displayed a silent fury that could be felt in the air around us. What I had thought to be human skin was now covered in feathers, and I could see fuzzy plumage peeking out from beneath his kimono. His kanmuri cap had changed to bright red with pulsing veins, almost like...a rooster's comb?

This was his true form. My instincts were keenly honed from my life in the

spirit realm, and every muscle in my body was screaming at me to get away. *What did Dad say I should do in times like these? Uhhh...ummm...*

Shielding my sister, I quickly put a hand to my waist pouch...but in my panic, I couldn't get the zipper open! My fingers were slick with sweat. Then the man started to move. *Hurry! Hurry, hurry, hurry, HURRY!*

"KWEEEEEEEEEEHHHH!" The man raised one leg high, baring his sharp talons and swinging them down at us.

"O-Onii-chan! AAAAAAAAAAAHHH!"

My sister clung to my back and screamed, but the talons never reached us. The paper talisman in my hand blocked the attack with a metallic screech and a scattering of sparks. Haruka's jaw dropped as she watched me deflect his attack without a scratch.

"That's one of Daddy's talismans!"

I shot her a toothy grin. "Heh heh heh! He taught me how to use them, just in case!"

In exchange for all my spiritual power, this talisman would shield us against any attack. Since the spirit realm was full of dangers, Dad wanted us to be able to protect ourselves. And so I had made him a promise one day...

"Yorutsuki, as the older brother, you have to keep your sister safe."

"Sure thing, Dad! I'll protect her, no matter what!"

I just hadn't thought I'd need to use it so soon.

"Urgh...!"

"Onii-chan!"

Dizzy, I lost my balance and fell to my knees. With all my spiritual power spent, I was exhausted.

The protection I'd set up was a translucent dome that manifested around us. Enraged that his attacks weren't hitting us, the man slammed his talons down again and again, but my barrier didn't budge.

At least, it wasn't supposed to.

Krkkk.

“Huh?”

The blood drained from my face. I didn't like the sound I was hearing. Fearfully, I looked over...and saw a few spiderweb cracks spreading from the spot where the man was focusing his kicks. *Oh, crap! We're in trouble! It's breaking!*

“Wait, but... Hold on a minute! It was supposed to be unbreakable!”

“O-Onii-chan?! AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! WE'RE GONNA DIIIE!!!”

“KWEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHH!”

Just as the man's screech echoed louder than ever before, a massive dark shadow leapt out of the bushes on the other side of the Isuzu River, jumped across, and pounced upon him, sinking its sharp fangs into his neck and spinning him like a top. In the dim light, I could see a dust cloud rising around them. We watched in shock as the dark figure swung him to and fro like a dog toy. He was powerless to do anything, much less attack us again.

“Hhhh...!”

We were saved. As I collapsed onto the cobblestone in relief, my body was shaking and I couldn't move my limbs. Tears burned in my eyes. But just then... the dark figure looked at us and scoffed.

“Didn't anybody ever teach you to look before you leap? I hope you've both learned your...*lesson!*”

With that roar, she flung the man into the river, where he landed with a loud *SPLASH*. We watched cautiously, but he didn't return to the surface, either for his own safety or because the current had carried him away. Then, as we quivered in fear, our savior walked up to us, squinting her mismatched eyes in utter annoyance.

“The hell were you stupid kids thinking?”

“NYAA-SAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!!!”

Haruka and I both latched onto the huge Kasha, burying our faces in her soft fur and shedding tears of relief.

“I...I thought I was gonna diiiieeee...!”

“Yeah, me too... I thought Onii-chan was gonna diiiieeee...!”

“Hey, quit wiping your nasty snot on my fur!”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH...!”

“Oh, shut *up* already! Don’t scream in my ear, you stupid babies!”

For a while we clung to Nyaa-san and sobbed uncontrollably, showing just how frightened we’d been. Before long, the sun disappeared behind the mountains and the only light in the darkness was Nyaa-san’s will-o’-the-wisps.

“Good grief. I knew you two were up to something. That’s why I told you not to get into trouble,” she grumbled as she licked our faces with her raspy tongue.

“Wait, so...you got worried and followed us?” I asked quietly.

She awkwardly turned her eyes away. “Well, if anything happened to you, Kaori would be crushed.”

I blinked at her. We’d left the bookstore pretty early that morning, so...had she been tailing us for hours and hours without us noticing...?

“Hey, Nyaa-san?” I put my arms around her big neck and gave her a hug.

“Thank you for doing so much for us.” I was so happy that my voice cracked.

My sister followed suit. “Nyaa-san, I had the wrong idea about you. You’re actually a really nice lady. I love you so much!”

Instantly, Nyaa-san puffed up like a balloon. “Wha...?! Don’t be ridiculous! I’m not some softie! I just did what I thought was best! And if those stupid mutts hadn’t screwed up, I would have snuck home before you ever saw me!”

“Oh yeah, where *are* those two, anyway...?”

“They were teleported to the Outer Shrine. ‘If anything goes south, I’ll protect you,’ he says. Hmph! All bark and no bite!”

That Shinto priest guy must have wanted to get rid of them before showing himself to Haruka and me. “But why would he split us up? And why did he get so mad all of a sudden?” I mused aloud.

“Yeah, exactly! It doesn’t make sense!” Haruka sighed. The two of us had met

a lot of nonhumans, but this was the first time we'd ever feared for our lives.

"You brats seriously don't get it?" Nyaa-san scoffed. "Unbelievable..."

But her exasperation only confused us more.

"...Greetings. Are you all right?"

Just then, we heard a little voice call out from behind us, like the tinkle of a bell. We turned to find a woman standing near us, holding a lantern. Like the man from earlier, she was wearing a cloth over her face. She was dressed like a shrine maiden, with a necklace of ornamental beads cascading over her white robe and hakama.

"It appears my servant has disgraced himself. Alas, if it weren't for his short temper, he would be one of my best."

The shrine maiden exuded an air of serenity. Illuminated by the bright yellow light of her lantern, she practically glowed in the darkness that engulfed the riverbank. Was this woman concealing a dainty laugh behind her hand the priest's boss? If so, she didn't seem very sorry.

"We almost *died*, you know," Haruka grumbled, pouting.

At this, she tilted her head. "But were you not the ones who committed a transgression worthy of harm?"

"What?"

"This is Ise Grand Shrine, home to a supreme deity. Surely even a child can imagine what might befall an intruder."

The blood drained from my face as I realized how big a mistake we'd made. "Were we wrong to come directly to the Inner Shrine?"

The shrine maiden nodded sternly. "Logically speaking, one would first visit the Outer Shrine and gain permission from Toyouke-Omikami before setting foot here."

"Oh..."

I could hear Akamadara's voice in the back of my mind: *My master has always said that one must follow the proper procedure when paying a visit to the realm*

of gods. He'd tried to warn us, but we ignored him!

The shrine maiden took one look at us cowering in front of her and snickered. "Well, what is done is done. Even my servant was willing to overlook it in exchange for the books he had reserved...but..."

She shot a glance at the river, and the implication was clear. The priest had turned on us... *Oh, no! And it was MY fault!* The blood in my veins ran cold until my fingertips turned to ice. That man would have forgiven our first gaffe, but my carelessness had pushed him over the edge!

"It's because I didn't make sure we had all the books."

"It's okay, Onii-chan..."

As I slumped my shoulders, Haruka offered me a pat on the back. Ever since we arrived in Ise, it had been one bad thing after another. My vision blurred with tears. What an idiot I'd been to think I was actually good at this line of work!

"All because I forgot a book..."

I rubbed my eyes with my sleeve. I couldn't let the tears fall, not in front of my little sister. Big brothers weren't supposed to cry. And yet the tears kept coming, as if to suggest this was all I would ever amount to.

"Oh dear." The shrine maiden frowned at me.

Just then, I felt Haruka squeeze my hand. I looked over at her...and saw that her face was as red as a tomato. *Oh, crap!* My face stiffened as I dreaded the worst. Haruka turning red was a sign of an incoming rampage!

"Don't worry, Onii-chan! I'll handle this!"

She clapped me hard on the back, and a loud *CRACK* rang out. I couldn't even get a word in edgewise before the pain set in and I doubled over. Meanwhile, she started digging through her backpack.

"Hey, lady!" she shouted, glaring defiantly at the shrine maiden.

"Er...yes...?"

"We're really sorry for being so rude!"

The woman blinked in surprise as my sister gave a deep, apologetic bow. Then she whipped her head back up, her eyes blazing.

“Just because we’re kids doesn’t mean we can get away with breaking the rules! We were just trying to help Mom with her work, but we should have learned how things work here first! This is a god’s home, and we got what was coming to us for being so disrespectful! We’ll bring the missing book right away, but until then...” She held out something in the shrine maiden’s direction. “Could you tell him I’ll give him this book to read while he waits...?”

I recognized it instantly as the famous book about mouse brothers who worked together to cook a giant pancake. I had a copy of it myself; Mom had given it to me when Haruka was born. She called it a “special story,” and so she wanted each of us to have one. My sister especially loved it so much that she’d ask Mom to read it to her every single night before bed. I’d heard it so many times that I could recite it by heart.

Haruka’s copy was tattered to the point that it was practically falling apart, but that ratty old book, believe it or not, was her most prized possession. She always carried it around with her whenever she went somewhere new or something made her upset. The book was her good-luck charm, which was why she’d brought it on this trip.

“My mom told me there are *soooo* many books in the world, you could spend your whole life reading and never get through them all! So I know how it feels to really want to read something. It’s our fault for forgetting and wasting his time! You should have him read this one while we’re gone. I highly recommend it!” Her hands shook as she held out the book, and she was obviously terrified to part with it.

“You’ll give up your book?” asked the perplexed shrine maiden.

Haruka nodded stiffly, forcing a smile onto her face. “It’s a heartwarming story! They cook up a pancake that’s *thiiiiis* big! It’s lots of fun just thinking about what it tastes like. It makes you want to read lots more stories!” Tears welled in her big brown eyes as she pushed her book into the shrine maiden’s hands. Then she clutched at her overalls, hard enough to wrinkle them. “So, please forgive us...and borrow books from our store again.” A single tear rolled

down her face, but she kept her head held high, gazing firmly at the shrine maiden with all her willpower. "Please don't stop liking books because of us."

She said every word without an ounce of hesitation...or tact, admittedly. Still, it resonated with me all the same. My sister was making a massive sacrifice, and I couldn't just stand idly by! I walked up beside her and knelt on the spot.

"I'm sorry too. Please forgive us."

Pressing my hands to the ground, I bowed my head. My heart was thundering in my ears. The magnitude of our mistakes made me so dizzy that I could scarcely feel the earth against my palms. A bookstore offered books to those who craved stories, and carelessness was a monstrous blunder in this line of work.

"Good grief," Nyaa-san sighed, shrinking down to normal cat size. Then she trotted forward and sat down between me and Haruka. "Well, what'll it be?"

The shrine maiden remained silent and still.

Nyaa-san narrowed her mismatched eyes in annoyance. "Oh, come on. Surely you're better than this."

"Pfft...!" At that point, the shrine maiden burst out laughing at the cat's caustic remark. Her shoulders quivered as she held Haruka's book. "All right, all right! I say, I've never seen such impudence in all my days!"

For some reason, she looked downright relieved. Did this mean...she forgave us? My sister and I stared blankly at her, then at each other.

"All humans make mistakes," she continued, stroking my sister's head, "and so do gods, from time to time." Then, as Haruka recoiled in fear, the shrine maiden pressed the book back into her little hands. "Some mistakes can never be undone...but this is not one of them."

The autumn breeze tickled us as it blew past, rustling the cloth over the woman's face and revealing a glimpse of her pale lips.

"You need only ensure that you do not repeat it. Even if your failure makes the whole world seem shrouded in darkness, you always have the power to make things right."

I could see that she was smiling, and I could tell from her lips alone that her expression was compassionate. The sight of it made Haruka's face crumple into tears.

"Th-thank you...!"

The woman nodded back. Somehow, everything was going to be okay! Instantly, the tension drained from my body, and I slumped over on the spot. Then Nyaa-san brushed her three tails over my cheek, and I looked up...but all I could see was the back of her head as she sat there, deliberately facing away from me. *Ugh, she's so snotty! Would it kill her to just be nice for once?!*

"That aside..." The shrine maiden clapped her hands together and looked hopefully at Haruka. "You seem very passionate about this book of yours. It is called a *picture book*, is it not? Am I correct in thinking it is aimed at a younger demographic?"

"Uh...y-yeah...?"

"Never before have I beheld such a book. Furthermore, it appears to be set in a Western country. Like a fairy tale, yet somehow different... I must admit it has piqued my curiosity."

"Really?!" Haruka leaned forward eagerly and grabbed the woman's hand, her cheeks rosy pink. "Wanna read it together?!"

Haruka, are you serious right now? That lady is the priest's boss! She's gotta be a powerful goddess or something! There's no way she wants to...

"Yes, let us do that!"

SHE DOES?! Now my head was starting to hurt.

"What is a 'pancake,' pray tell?"

"You haven't heard of pancakes?! They're made with flour and eggs, and you mix it all together and fry 'em up till they're fluffy!"

As they chatted happily, I glanced at them out of the corner of my eye, then exhaled. "Guess I'll go back for that book." First and foremost, I needed to make up for my mistake.

As I slowly rose to my feet, Nyaa-san walked over to me. "Want a ride, kid?"

she asked coolly.

“Yes, please,” I admitted.

“Ugh, what a mess this turned into.” Grumbling, she quickly swelled in size, then crouched down to help me climb on. And just in case I started to fall, she kept one of her long tails available as a handrail.

Mom, I think you’re right after all. Nyaa-san is the biggest tsundere ever!

“Maybe cats aren’t so bad.”

“What? Did you say something?”

“No, ma’am!” Wiping the smile off my face, I swung a leg over her back. “Hey, Haruka, I’m going back for that book we forgot!”

My sister waved excitedly as she hugged the shrine maiden. “Okay, I’ll be here! We’re gonna read a book together!” Her cheeks were as red as apples.

Boy, I hope that lady can handle her. When she gets going, she’s as big of a chatterbox as Mom and me!

“Well then, let us begin at once. Oh! First, perhaps I should prepare some refreshments...and some sweets! You, girl...have you ever tried tang guozi pastries?”

Never mind. Looks like she’ll be fine. Maybe she’s a bookworm too.

“Hee hee hee... Perhaps we should read inside the Ama-no-Iwato cave. Then again, if we do not emerge by tomorrow morning, the world will be in an uproar!”

I wasn’t sure I liked the sound of that, but I decided to pretend I didn’t hear it.

Nyaa-san and I hurried back to the spirit realm and raced into the bookstore, where we found a whole crowd of familiar spirits waiting.

“Yorutsuki! Where in the world have you...?!”

Gracefully ducking an ashen-faced Grandma Noname, I grabbed Volume 1 of *The Twelve Zodiac Beasts: A Study* and dashed back outside.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?! And where’s Haruka?!”

“We’ll be home soon!”

She sounded worried, but Nyaa-san and I hurried back to the human world anyway. When we arrived back at Ise Grand Shrine, we were greeted by Haruka, the shrine maiden, and the priest from earlier.

“Please accept my sincerest apologies!” Bowing deeply, I offered the man his missing volume.

He scratched his head with a sheepish smile. “Likewise, I beg forgiveness for my rage.”

“No, no, it was our fault that we forgot one of your books!”

We bowed back and forth in a classic Japanese apology battle. He no longer showed any traces of his rooster form, which made me wonder what sort of spirit he was.

“Could you sign this receipt?” Nervously, I held out a pen and paper. Oddly enough, his signature was flawless.

“Thank you very much,” I said, putting the receipt back into my backpack. “Next time you need a book, come see us again at the spirit realm bookstore!”

“Indeed, I shall!” Nodding, he held out his hand, and I shook it.

“Th-thank you, sir!”

It was hard to imagine that this same guy had tried to kill us earlier that very day. *Man, what a relief!* I was so happy that tears sprang to my eyes. Then my sister walked over, looking smug.

“Nice work, Onii-chan!”

“All thanks to you, Haruka.”

Beneath the starry sky, we exchanged a smile. Then she leaned forward and whispered in my ear: “It was really manly of you to protect me with that talisman!”

That made my ears burn with embarrassment.

And so, our first adventure...I mean, first job...was a roaring success!

We returned to the bookstore with our spirits at an all-time high—only for the grown-ups to immediately put us through the wringer. Our absence had sparked a huge panic. To be fair, we *had* been gone for a pretty long time, so I could understand why they were worried.

“You little troublemakers really did it this time! Noname nearly had a stroke!”

“For real, it was so funny to see her turn white as a sheet!”

As we slumped our shoulders, Uncle Kinme and Uncle Ginme cracked jokes.

“Kids really are free spirits, aren’t they? If they keep it up, Noname’s gonna get a stomach full of ulcers.”

“Uh oh! Good thing Suimei can cook her up some medicine for that!”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

Of course, I could tell from the look in their metallic eyes that neither of them was actually upset at us. On the contrary, they were fully supportive of our mischief.

Behind them stood Grandpa Seigen, with his hands on his hips and a stern look on his face. At his feet sat Kuro and Akamadara in his canine form, both with their ears pulled back. Evidently the two of them had already been given a thorough scolding.

“Kuro and Akamadara, the two of you will be going without dinner tonight.”

“Hnnn! But Seigen...I...”

“Master, please, have mercy! If punishment is required, then give it to me! Master Kuro has done nothing wrong!”

Grandpa Seigen was downright furious that they had taken us to the human world and exposed us to danger. Normally, he was all smiles, but not today. But to be fair, they *had* kinda failed to protect us after promising they would...

“Hnnnnnn... I really thought I had it under control... Stupid rooster! I guess I gotta train harder...”

“And I shall train with you, Master Kuro. Let us achieve new heights together!”

“Oh, shut up and leave me alone!”

In his current state of depression, Kuro was in no mood to put up with Akamadara’s usual smothering love. But Akamadara himself was full of life, seemingly energized by having spent the whole day with Kuro. *Right... I forgot how obsessed he is...*

“Gah! Ow ow ow ow!” As I was watching them absently, I felt a sharp tug on my ear. “That hurts, dang it! Stop pulling my... Aaahh!”

“You scared me, you little munchkins!”

The next thing I knew, my sister and I were being pulled into a big hug. Then I saw the vivid green hair and felt the surprisingly sturdy arms, and I knew it was Grandma Noname.

“For crying out loud! If you wanted to help, you should have told us before you left! Do you have any idea how worried I was?!”

She was crying buckets, but unfortunately, I was more distracted by the choke hold she’d put us in. *Grandma, you’re too strong for your own good!*

“We know! Sorry! We didn’t mean to stay out this late!” Haruka apologized casually. But it was clear she didn’t actually think we were in the wrong, and frankly, neither did I.

“You’re not sorry at all, you brats!” Grandma snapped. She had seen straight through us.

“We *are* sorry! Really!”

“I’m just glad you two got home safe,” said a calm voice from the back of the room. It was Dad. “We were worried sick about you. Of course, we knew you’d probably be fine since Kuro and the cat were with you, but still...”

His white hair glinted dully in the glow of the glimmerflies. Though the apothecary had closed for the night hours ago, he was still wearing his work clothes; he’d obviously been too preoccupied with our absence to get changed. Then I saw the dark circles of exhaustion under his eyes and started to feel a little guilty. Maybe we really had gone too far trying to help Mom.

It wasn’t like we *wanted* to scare them, though! We were just trying to be

helpful, but I didn't have enough life experience to know how to explain it.

"It's one thing for Haruka to get into trouble, but you wouldn't normally join her, Yorutsuki." As I was mulling it over, Dad gazed down at me. "You wanted to help your mother with her work, right? Will you talk to me about it?"

His light brown eyes seemed to see straight through me. Whenever he looked at me, I knew I would be caught in any lie I tried to tell.

"Haruka?"

"Onii-chan?"

My sister and I exchanged a glance, followed by a nod. Then I opened my backpack.

"Here's the delivery receipts."

I dropped the paper scraps into Dad's palms, and he was taken aback by the sheer number of them. "You delivered *all* these books?"

"Yeah, me and Haruka and Kuro and Akamadara. We delivered books to spirits all across Japan to help Mom while she's dealing with morning sickness!"

And so, I regaled him with the tale of our journey: how I chatted about Dazai Osamu with a pitch-black giant, how Tamamo-no-Mae flirted with me, how excited and nervous I was to visit all those new places, how crowd-sick I got in Ise...

"And he bought me a Matsusaka beef skewer variety pack!" Haruka chimed in.

"Yeah, to repay you for nursing me back to health. It was really expensive, though."

"Ha ha! I see. Was it as good as they say?" Dad asked.

"Yup, every bite!"

Our father listened intently as we told him everything that had happened, even the parts where we messed up.

"We didn't follow the proper procedure for meeting with a god," I admitted.

"Akamadara tried to warn us, but we didn't listen," Haruka added.

Deities, like spirits, were not the same as humans; they had their own set of mandatory rules to be followed, and they didn't take kindly to those who flouted them. This was a lesson Dad had taught me, but I had failed to learn from it... Really, you could say I'd brought the whole Ise Grand Shrine incident upon myself.

"I didn't check to make sure we had all the books."

"That rooster man sure was scary. He got so mad at us..."

It was the first time I'd ever experienced mortal danger. The memory alone was enough to make me shiver.

"That barrier technique you taught me...it almost shattered. I was really scared."

It had consumed all my spiritual power, and yet that priest nearly broke through!

"I'm not surprised. It may work against spirits, but it wasn't designed to withstand attacks from a divine messenger of Amaterasu-Omikami."

"Say what?!"

The blood drained from my face. Amaterasu was the patron deity of Ise Grand Shrine's Inner Shrine, and Japanese mythology described her as the goddess in charge of all the other gods. If that priest was one of her messengers, then it was no wonder my barrier didn't stand a chance! We'd been in more danger than I thought!

"...Wait, but..."

Didn't that shrine maiden call him *her* servant...?

A horrific realization dawned on me, and I looked around for Nyaa-san. Had she actually looked Amaterasu-Omikami dead in the eye and said, "Surely you're better than this"?! How unbelievably rude! If I were a god, I would have subjected her to divine punishment for that!

If not for Amaterasu's boundless patience, we truly could have died. Goosebumps pricked up across my entire body. It was practically a miracle that we'd made it home without a scratch...

“What’s the matter, Yorutsuki?” Dad asked, narrowing his eyes at me as I went pale. I decided to tell him how I’d felt over the course of the journey.

“At first, I thought that running this bookstore work was a piece of cake.”

“Oh?”

“But I was wrong. Now I get that if I don’t respect our customers’ cultures, I could put myself in danger...and I see just how desperately they’ve been waiting for their books to arrive.”

I would never forget the looks of joy on the spirits’ faces when we gave them their books. They had all been waiting for ages, so I was delighted we got their orders to them. Plus, the look of fury on the rooster man’s face when he realized we hadn’t brought all the books... It was our fault for letting him down, and I would always remember that.

“Somewhere deep down, I thought they were ‘just books.’ It’s easy to forget that books have the power to touch people’s hearts, and that’s why they’re so important. And another thing...”

“What is it?” Dad asked with a frown.

“Our bookstore is *awesome*. Delivering books to people is a really honorable job.”

I spoke with confidence, and he listened quietly to every word. Then a smile crept up on his lips, and he gently ruffled my hair. “You should go tell your mother that.”

At this, I exchanged a look with Haruka...and our faces lit up. “Okay!”

“She’s waiting for you in her room. Go let her know you’re safe.”

With Dad’s encouragement, we headed to the master bedroom. Apparently, Mom’s morning sickness was so bad that she couldn’t even get out of bed.

“We must’ve really scared her, even though we didn’t mean to,” I mused sadly.

“Well...w-we were supposed to come home before they ever knew we were gone!” Haruka stammered nervously.

“She’ll understand,” Dad told us with a gentle smile. “She’s your mother, after all.”

His words warmed my heart. In that moment, I wanted to see her right away so she wouldn’t need to worry for another second!

“Let’s go, Haruka!”

“Okay! Oh...wait...” She paused to dig around in her backpack and pulled out a letter which she handed to Dad. “The lady said to give you this!”

“What lady?” he replied, confused. Then our uncles walked over.

“What’s this I hear about a lady?” asked Uncle Ginme.

“I’m curious too! Maybe it’s Yorutsuki’s first love!” Uncle Kinme joked.

“Keep your wild ideas to yourself,” Dad scoffed. Then he opened the letter, and... “Wh-what in the world?! This order is huge!”

Apparently, it was a request for more books. The paper was covered in titles and delivery addresses. Truth be told, the sheer number was downright absurd.

“What’s this? ‘As I would like to bestow books upon my divine retainers, I ask that you deliver each one individually. Furthermore, please instruct Toyouke-Omikami to add ‘pancake’ ingredients to the holy pantry. Charge all expenses to Amaterasu-Omikami...’ What the heck did you kids do?!” Uncle Ginme turned and looked at us in shock.

I blinked. *Wait, what’s going on?*

“Sounds like a nightmare! Do you know how many retainers Amaterasu has?! This order is gonna feed your family for the next year!” Uncle Kinme howled.

“That reminds me, Kaori was saying she wanted to turn Amaterasu-Omikami into a regular customer. She thought she’d have to start with the retainers and get them hooked one by one, but it looks like you’ve beaten her to the punch! Yes, I always knew my grandkids were something special! You’ve both got bright futures ahead of you!” Grandma Nona gushed.

“Well now, this is incredible work. Maybe we should raise your allowance,” Grandpa Seigen remarked.

I still didn't understand what was going on, but it looked like we'd managed to do something really difficult. "Haruka, what happened while I was gone?!" I hissed.

"Well, she really liked the book, so I told her a bunch of others she could borrow from our store. That's why she wrote the letter!" she explained, her face pale.

Apparently, Haruka was responsible for the whole thing, and she didn't even realize what a tremendous feat it was. *That's my sister for you...always stirring up trouble for other people!*

"Did...did I do something wrong? Is Mama gonna be mad at me...?" she whimpered, tears springing to her eyes. The last thing she ever wanted was for her favorite person in the whole world to get upset at her.

"No, you're fine. Let's go tell Mom. She's gonna be excited!" I reassured her.

At this, her face lit up. "Really? So my big surprise is gonna make her happy?"

"Yeah, it'll be the best surprise ever!"

Grinning, we joined hands and dashed off to Mom's room. What would we say to her? Maybe she would get mad at us for a few seconds, but knowing her, she'd give us a big hug and say, "I'm so proud of my babies!"

And so, our pounding hearts filled with a sense of accomplishment, we ran up the stairs two at a time.

Side Story: Two-Sided Smile

IT WAS A GRAY, snowy night in Tokyo. In contrast with the hustle and bustle of holiday shopping, the city lost its color when the end of the day drew near. Though it seemed glamorous at first glance, this concrete jungle was but a battlefield littered with lifeless husks. Only a scant few were successful here, sipping fine wine upon a throne of corpses. Indeed, Tokyo's appeal was in its bright, garish colors, like a slime mold feeding on the dead. It could be considered an art form, the way the flowers grew over the decay with their sweet scent luring in new victims.

But, of course, there were those who set foot in Tokyo knowing full well that it was a death trap. The successful ones carried a sparkle not unlike the hero of a story...and who among us can claim they haven't wished to be the main character just once? At least that way their hard work would always be rewarded. Thus, they braved the dangers, knowing it could be their final resting place.

And I, Toochika the kappa spirit, used to be one of them.

I left my hometown with a heart full of hope and burning desire. But the stronger the blaze, the faster it ran out of fuel.

"Another year is ending..."

Here I was in the Shinbashi district of Tokyo's Minato Ward, sipping hot sake at a run-down old mobile food cart. Vinyl curtains stained with exhaust fumes swayed in the chilly winter wind. The steam rising from the oden stew was tinged yellow under the light of the bare bulb.

"Hardly a rare occurrence, is it?"

This dull response was offered to me by none other than Nurarihyon, leader of the spirits. His appearance today, with blond hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, and a pointy, hooked nose, showed no trace of his Japanese heritage. Simply put, he would look right at home in the country of vodka

lovers... *Aha*. Nurarihyon always had a different appearance every time I saw him, and this one suggested that he was in the mood to drink. People from northern countries, where even one's breath turned to ice, had a reputation for bulletproof iron livers.

"First you ask to meet up out of the blue, and now suddenly you're in a bad mood?" I asked him.

"Because you're stating the obvious. Time is a flat circle. How many times have we seen winter come and go? To me, it feels like spring was only yesterday." Pouting his lips, he poured a generous helping of cayenne pepper into his sake cup. *Ew*. Sure, it would warm him up, but was that any way for a leader to take his liquor?

"Oh dear. Well, I apologize for the offense! Let's try to have a good time. After all..."

I looked at the food cart, with its yellowed curtains and grease-stained counter. Even the ceiling was slightly slanted... *Damn, this thing is falling apart*. If someone told me it was made of scrap wood, I would believe them.

"This place has so much character."

Grinning, I used my handkerchief to wipe the counter, and the food cart owner disappeared behind his newspaper. Maybe I'd upset him. *Well, sorry, but I don't want my coat sleeves getting dirty*.

"Keh heh heh! Is it beneath you? Would you have preferred a classy bar?" he asked.

"No, no. Bars are great, but I kind of like drinking cheap booze on the street corner, away from the stink of the city."

"...Do you *want* the owner here to stab you?"

"Ha ha ha!" Laughing jovially, I took another sip. It was getting lukewarm, but, surprisingly, the flavor wasn't that bad. The alcohol rumbled the moment it hit my belly. "Hey, Boss, can I get some oden?"

"Sure thing."

I smiled as the owner got right to work, noticing how Nurarihyon seemed to

feel right at home here. Then my gaze drifted over to the forest of empty cups on the counter, and I let out a weary sigh. “What’s gotten into you tonight? You don’t normally drink this much, do you, Leader?”

“Oh, lay off. And give us some daikon, will you, Boss?”

“You got it.”

The owner set a bowl of oden in front of me with a *thunk*. Then he reached into the pot with a pair of long cooking chopsticks and pulled out a hot, steaming cylinder of radish, its color tinged yellow from the broth. It had simmered for so long that it was half-translucent. *Well now*. This place may have been a dump, but I was starting to think their food might be worth it.

“Oh, if only I could be in high spirits all the time,” Nurarihyon mumbled, his face flushed and his speech slurred.

At this, I turned my attention away from the daikon and back to him. “You know, this is unusual for you. Almost feels a bit out of character.”

“Can’t a guy complain?”

“Sure you can. I’m not against it.”

While he was grumbling, I tucked into my oden stew. The radish was so soft that you could scarcely feel the fiber. I watched the juices drip from it, then dipped it in karashi mustard, and...

“Hfffh!”

When I bit into it, my mouth filled with broth which had seeped down to the core. *How exquisite!* The gentle flavor put a smile on my face. Yes, this was clearly the right call. *Can’t have oden stew without daikon.*

“Gghh...”

The grunt drew my gaze to the seat next to me, where Nurarihyon’s handsome face was twisted in a grimace. *Too much mustard? Oh dear*. It was an unusually silly blunder for our esteemed leader to make.

“Even the great Nurarihyon can’t handle the sting of hot mustard, it seems.” Concealing my surprise, I handed him a napkin with a smile.

He glared back at me, his eyes watery. “Just who do you think I am?”

“The invincible supreme leader of the spirits?”

“Ho ho! If I were *invincible*, I wouldn’t be drinking during the holidays.”

He looked tired, and his voice carried a hint of sorrow. He was obviously fishing for me to ask him about it, so I decided to take the bait. “What happened?”

Instantly, he became more animated. “Well, there have been more conflicts between species cropping up... If I were truly invincible, I’d have stopped the violence before it started.”

“Ah. Is it the Tsuchigumo? They’re always at war with one clan or another. It’s a damn mess.”

“Yup, this time they picked a fight with the foxes. I warned them not to tangle with those hotheads, but alas, they ignored me. Now some kid’s gone on a rampage, and all the foxes across both our worlds have stepped in, and it’s a nightmare, and I just...don’t know what to do.”

“I see.”

As he lamented, I looked at him up close. As the leader of the spirits, he traveled all over the realm to maintain peace and order. It was no exaggeration to say that he was the only reason the world of eternal night hadn’t devolved into chaos.

“Sounds like a lot to deal with...even though no one’s asked you to,” I remarked with a meaningful smile.

He frowned. “I don’t *need* anyone to ask me. As long as I am a Nurarihyon, I will protect our world. I exist to be a leader, whether I like it or not.”

Now it was my turn to frown.

Nurarihyon was basically our commander in chief, though even *he* couldn’t remember whose idea it had originally been. The thing about spirits, though, is that if someone describes us a certain way, we somehow feel compelled to live up to those words. That explained why the azuki-arai washed azuki beans, and the tofu-kozo spent every night peddling tofu, and the nurikabe walled people

off from their destinations... Hell, it was why Kurokami spent every day crying while gazing at the Tsugaru Strait. His pain had long since healed, but because he had been *defined* as a weeping deity, he was forced to continue.

You could call it the unique nature of spirits who were only spoken of in legends. As long as the general public believed that Nurarihyon was a leader, the man in front of me would strive to meet those expectations, no matter how much he suffered in the process. What a crappy job to have.

Me, on the other hand? I had it easy. Humans hadn't assigned any miserable duty to the kappa...though that was a double-edged sword in its own right. With a self-deprecating smile, I poured more sake into Nurarihyon's cup. "I suppose that's just your lot in life. Hang in there," I told him offhandedly.

His grimace deepened. "Care to give it a try? It's hard work, but it can be a lot of fun too."

"Excuse me?" I blinked back at him like a buffoon. He met my gaze.

"Why don't the two of us lead the spirits together? Will you think about it?" His tone was dead serious, as was the look in his blue eyes.

"This wouldn't happen to be why you invited me here...is it...?" I asked fearfully.

He responded with a wide grin, "But of course! I was thinking we should split the responsibilities of the two worlds between us."

Over time, spirits had laid down roots in all sorts of places. Some lived in the spirit realm, some in secluded pockets hidden away from human civilization, some in disguise among the humans...and I had heard it was starting to cause problems lately. The Tsuchigumo-fox conflict was one example.

"Even I can only handle so much. I want you to take charge of the human world."

Those feeble words hit me like a ton of bricks, and I started to sweat. "No, I couldn't possibly!" I shouted, shaking my head. "It's too much...I'm just a kappa!"

"Liar. Of all the spirits who dwell in the human world, there's not a soul who

hasn't heard of Tootchika from Kappabashi."

"No, no, no! Just because I'm famous doesn't mean I can do the same work as you! I have my own strengths and weaknesses like anyone else!"

A cold sweat trickled down my back. Here in the Information Age, it would be all too easy for a spirit to get a new definition. If I didn't speak up now, rumors would spread about me being the leader of the human world's spirits!

Frankly, this was the last thing I needed. I wanted to live my life *freely*, not in service to the entire population like Nurarihyon! Not when I'd only just begun to accept my lot in life! Gritting my teeth, I forced a smile on my face as I looked at him. This was a critical moment, and I needed to convince him that I wasn't capable of managing the human world.

"I *do* look after the spirits of the human world, but I've never thought of myself as a leader. It's simply not within my capacity."

"Your...capacity?" he repeated with a frown.

"Right. You see, successful people generally have a certain level of backbone," I explained carefully. "They possess the makings of a *hero*—the main character of a story—wouldn't you say? Like Shinonome and Tamaki, for instance."

A deep longing welled in my chest as I spoke the names of my dearly departed friends. The two of them had spent their whole lives fighting for their dreams. One was born of forgery, decorated with untruths until he finally became a Tsukumogami; the other had died after dedicating his days to his craft and his wife, only to be resurrected and forced to seek an escape from immortality. Their origins couldn't have been more different, and yet they came together in the end to publish the spirit realm's first book.

Their work had a truly tremendous impact. It was no exaggeration to call it a ray of hope for spirits who had fallen into obscurity as they were pushed out of the human world. And as someone who had watched it all unfold firsthand, I could confidently say that it was a damn good story. Both of them were fit to be main characters. Their deeds would one day be the stuff of legend, like the heroes of old. Compared to them, my life was utterly average.

"As for me, I have no story worth discussing at length...no backbone, no guts.

Sad to say, I just don't think I could bring the human world together."

I sipped my sake with a smile. My throat burned, but only briefly; once the liquid was in my belly, it was gone without a trace. Quick to warm and quick to cool off, like a metaphor for my life.

"Now, I admit I've been successful in business... Few spirits have clawed their way to the top like I have, and I know I'm in a better position than most. But my life has been genuinely uneventful: all smooth sailing without any ups and downs. A good story has dramatic conflict, but for me there's been none. That's why I feel someone like me has no right to share the stage with you," I concluded.

"Where were you born again?" Nurarihyon asked quietly.

"Near Shimanto. That region is the birthplace of all kappa." This gave me an idea, and I shifted in my seat. Holding up the sake bottle, I suggested: "Do you want to hear about the first half of my life? I think it'll help you understand why you shouldn't entrust the human world to me...though it's a rather boring story, overall."

He nodded and held out his cup. "Yes, please."

The clear liquid filled the glass, gleaming beneath the light of the bare bulb... and as I gazed down at it, I thought back to the distant past.

"I was born at the Shimanto River, said to be Japan's last clear stream. Since ancient times, a great number of spirits had lived on these lands, where the torrential waters raced beneath the clear blue sky...and I was one of them, an unremarkable kappa in every way.

"You may wonder if I was originally human, but no. From the day I was born, I was a nonhuman creature living peacefully in the Shimanto waters, occasionally dragging people into the rapids. I couldn't tell you how many years it's been since I was born; I stopped keeping track a long time ago. All I know is that it was during a time when the capital city of our nation was Kyoto, not Tokyo.

"I still love my homeland. To me it was the most beautiful place in Japan. If Tokyo was gray, then Shimanto was a bright and shining place, absorbing the gentle rays of sunlight and sparkling bright enough to blind you. It was a

timeless land, unembellished in the best sense of the word, where nothing tried to be more than it was. It was truly a world without darkness. Shimanto's clear, pure waters accepted all things without making waves."

"You make it sound so lovely and yet you left!" Nurarihyon remarked pointedly. "A sincerely happy person would never think of escape...but nonetheless, here you are, all settled down in a city that could never be called clear or pure. Is that not proof that you are no ordinary kappa?"

He seemed desperate to cast me in some special light, perhaps hoping to convince himself that he and I were the same. Alas, truth be told, there were no two ways about it.

"On the contrary, it proves *exactly* how ordinary of a kappa I am. All country boys yearn to see the city, don't they? That's simply how the world works."

"And you're saying you're no different?"

"Right! I was happy with the beauty of my homeland, but eventually I got bored with it. I wanted something more.

"And so, I left Shimanto. I can't remember why I decided to go to Tokyo... maybe I'd overheard humans near the river talking about the city and got curious. In any case, I was dead set on it. I believed with all my heart that Tokyo had everything Shimanto lacked, and therefore it would offer me a more thrilling life.

"Back then, I thought my homeland had nothing worth staying for. Everything I wanted seemed to exist only in the capital, to the point that it pushed me to despair. I was such a fool... I was just desperate to escape my stagnant reality."

Boredom is the greatest torture... Never was there a more accurate idiom. As beings that lived far longer than humans but lacked their creature comforts, spirits often turned to violence the moment they found their hands idle. Perhaps *youthful indiscretion* was the best way to describe it.

"Looking back, I was almost too decisive. Really, I should have let those dreams stay dreams. Instead, one day I dragged a passing merchant into the river, killed him, and stole his identity. That was how I gained his horse, his luggage, and most importantly, his human appearance. This was the fastest way

for me to get into the city.”

“Eugh. That’s dark,” Nurarihyon grimaced.

“Ha! Lip service,” I scoffed. “It’s just the way spirits are! Surely you know that better than anyone. We lurk in the humans’ shadows and milk them for their possessions.”

“Well, you’re not wrong...”

“At the time, I didn’t feel a single ounce of guilt. On the contrary, I was more annoyed that the merchant’s kimono was so plain. Once I was in human form, I jumped astride the horse and headed to Tokyo, selling my ill-gotten wares along the way. It felt like a sightseeing trip, and I enjoyed it very much.”

“It takes time for spirits to acclimate into human society. Was it hard for you?”

“I wish I could say it was.” As he listened attentively to my story, I put on an impish smirk. “It turned out I had a natural talent for trade, and I soon made a small fortune. Frightening how gifted I am, isn’t it?”

“How very snide. Have you considered learning humility?”

“I’m just telling it like it is! What do you want me to say?”

“Well then, I’m happy it went so well for you. Did it feel like your whole world had changed?”

I nodded emphatically. “Oh, it most certainly did! It was more thrilling than I ever could have imagined during those nights I spent stargazing in the river. I felt like I was the hero of my own story. I peddled my wares all over Japan, made a lot of friends, even had a passionate romance or two... Nothing could beat the thrill of having infiltrated human society. It felt as though I had become someone special, and that was a good feeling indeed.”

Nurarihyon frowned at my wistfulness. “You make it sound as though you yourself aren’t special at all.”

“Ha ha ha! As I’ve been trying to tell you, I’m no hero, and I never will be.” I traced a finger around the rim of my cup as the bitterness spread in my chest. “That’s something I learned the hard way: by meeting a *real* hero.”

As I recalled, it was near the tail end of the Edo period when I first met the man I would later call a lifelong friend. His name was Mitsui Hachirobe Takatoshi, and he founded what would eventually become one of Japan's three largest financial conglomerates. He was a man blessed with talent, and I was sincerely glad to have met him.

But for a fool like me with his head in the clouds, he was also a wake-up call.

The first thing I noticed about Takatoshi was the fire in his eyes. "Nice to meet you. You're Toochika-san, aren't you?"

Back then I was running a kimono shop, not a general store like I do now. As a spirit, my longevity enabled me to build a network of connections far greater than any human's. This was perhaps my ace in the hole. Using those connections to broker deals, I had climbed quite high on the social ladder.

He and I first met in Kyoto, though my store was in Tokyo—or Edo, as it was called then. At the time, all the finest kimono shops in Edo were operated by Kyoto tradesmen, and that was what brought the two of us together.

"I hear you know a lot of folks."

"Yes, I do."

"They say your sales network covers the entire nation. Could I please take a moment of your time?"

He gave the name of a well-known restaurant and asked to speak to me there. To a businessman, connections were worth their weight in gold, so I was used to people seeking me out for networking opportunities. And because I so deeply believed I was a hero, I gladly accepted all their dinner invitations. It felt like my duty.

"Hmmm..."

But though I normally would have readily agreed, this particular case gave me pause...for, you see, Takatoshi's reputation preceded him. At first glance, he seemed like a genial old man in his fifties with a shaved head. So why did all his industry peers hate him with a fiery passion?

Because his revolutionary business strategy spat in the face of old traditions.

At the time, the finest kimono shops had two main sales methods: taking custom orders in advance or bringing current stock to customers' homes for them to choose from. The cost was either split into two and paid in summer and winter or paid in a lump sum in December. Sales were usually made on credit to wealthy clientele; this was because we overcharged for the fabric to make up for potential missed payments, driving prices up until the working class could no longer afford it. This drove the cost of operating a kimono shop sky-high.

But now, Takatoshi had thrown a wrench into the works. He accepted payment in cash only, and instead of selling entire bolts of fabric, he would cut lengths from them and sell small amounts without upcharging. Naturally, this made his shop the most affordable in town.

These days it's common practice to have a retail store open to the public, but in the Edo period, this was usually restricted to lower-end shops on the outskirts of the city. Takatoshi's store, however, was located on the busy main street, right next to the luxury establishments. Oh, the impropriety!

But affordable fabric was exactly what the people of Edo needed. Clothing trends were in constant flux, so all the fashionistas flocked to his store. This gave him massive profits of around 150 ryo—approximately 12 million yen in today's currency—*per day*. Alas, this was an affront to his fellow industry peers, and in fact, a few longstanding store owners had complained about him to me.

He was a smart, competent businessman, and I was genuinely interested in getting to know him. But if I were to be seen with him in public, it could damage the trust I'd built with the other tradesmen. I wasn't sure what to do.

"Oho?" Takatoshi noted my silence and squinted curiously. "Are you no different from the rest of them?"

This comment bruised my pride. I wasn't like *them*! I saw myself as a revolutionary like he was. I felt the only difference between myself and Takatoshi was that I was in good standing with our peers. I couldn't allow him to lump me in with the other nobodies!

"You say I'm the same as them? I'd love to hear your insight," I pushed back, concealing my irritation beneath a smile. By accepting his invitation, I had all

but announced an alliance with this dangerous rebel.

To this day, I can still remember the way his eyes lit up at that exact moment. “I knew I was right to have faith in you!”

When I spoke with him at length, I learned that he was a truly fascinating man. He had charisma in spades, exuding an aura of success from every pore... and, at the same time, he was something of an enigma. He was the epitome of a hero, a Chosen One hand-picked to receive all of God’s blessings. His greatness was worthy of being passed down to future generations. I was curious to learn more, so we dined together several times and I asked him all sorts of things.

Most people wouldn’t think to upend decades of tradition. Even if a revolutionary idea should spring to mind, they would write it off as “too unconventional” in fear of backlash. After all, the status quo was a comfortable place, and it was easier to simply follow the path laid down by someone else. Those who sought to carve their own way were either eccentrics or entrepreneurs with hearts of steel, and Takatoshi seemed to be the latter. He was open-minded enough to see the flaws in the system, and he lamented them.

“Why, it boggles the mind! They could all be raking in the same profits, but instead they pretend not to see it, afraid to put a single toe out of line. I can scarcely stand it!”

He was boldly decisive, deeply covetous, and downright obsessed with commerce, which likely sprang from the events of his past.

In Matsusaka, Ise Province, present-day Mie Prefecture, Takatoshi was born the fourth and youngest son of a couple who ran Lord Echigo’s Sake, dealing in liquor and miso. From an early age, he had a clear talent for sales; after his oldest brother entrusted him with a store in Edo, Takatoshi made ten times the startup costs in just a decade. With the wind in his sails, he sought to open a store of his own, but his oldest brother was unsure of his abilities and stopped him. Instead, Takatoshi was sent back home.

At the time, Edo was flourishing, and all the tradesmen were desperate to make a name for themselves there. But Takatoshi was forced to waste those

prime years in his tiny hometown, and it was only recently, after his eldest brother died, that he had finally been able to open a store in the big city. He was fifty-two years old now, an age that some would have called his declining years, but here he was trying to get a new business off the ground. It didn't take a brilliant mind to realize that there was some deeper reason to it.

So I asked him: "Why are you willing to take such drastic measures to succeed? Is it revenge for the store you weren't allowed to open all those years ago?"

Looking back now, it was a heartless question. God knows I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of it. That being said, his business strategy was so extreme that I had to wonder if he was intentionally trying to provoke people. Furthermore, I was sick to death of hearing our fellow tradesmen complain about him. That was why I implied that he should stop rocking the boat and getting everyone riled up.

It was meant to be a warning, really. He must have known what I was hinting at. But instead, he *smirked* at me, cool as a cucumber, as though he had done nothing wrong!

"Revenge? You can't run a business with a mindset like that. You gotta offer reliable products that don't hurt the wallet too much. When the customer's happy, I'm even happier! That's all there is to it."

He said being a salesman was about customer service, and his history had nothing to do with it. He even seemed *proud* of his work. Personally, I couldn't begin to understand it. The more I talked to him, the more sense he seemed to make...but considering the current state of his store, it just didn't add up.

"You sound confident. Funny...I hear all the other stores in Edo have turned up their noses at you."

This time he had made an enemy of Matsuya, the exclusive retailer to the Echizen Matsudaira samurai family. A member of that family had been caught buying Takatoshi's low-price wares instead of doing business with their personal purveyor, which was the biggest affront imaginable. When the two businesses came together for a meeting, the Matsuya representative outright insulted Takatoshi's shop, but it was really no surprise. Some reckless

newcomer had swept in with unheard-of tactics and snatched away everything they had spent years slowly building! Of course they'd be angry.

After that, Matsuya and all the other merchants on the main street turned against Takatoshi completely. They banded together to shut him out. Unfortunately for them, it didn't seem to be having much of an effect on him.

"My base of operations is in Kyoto, so if the Edo stores won't trade with me, I'll just get my stock somewhere else. I'll make it work."

He seemed unruffled. Perhaps he was panicking on the inside, or perhaps he was reassured by the support of his understanding wife. The harassment of his store was getting worse with each passing day, and yet he refused to change his strategy. Honestly, the stories of what he endured sent a shiver down my spine.

Apparently, the merchants on the main street reported him to the Edo magistrate's office for obstruction of business. They also spread rumors that his products were re-dyed to cover up their low quality. They even tried to poach his employees! A businessman has no bigger asset than employees with an understanding of internal affairs who can keep his stores running. It was a dirty tactic, but when it came to their most despised retail rival, suddenly they didn't believe in the Golden Rule anymore. Were these people really that heartless?

"Doesn't all this make you miserable?" I asked after Takatoshi told me their latest move was to use his store as a public lavatory. He seemed to think it was funny, but I shuddered to imagine how I would feel if it happened to me.

Rubbing his shaved head, he merely smiled. "Really, it just proves how successful my business is. Just watch: sooner or later, the folks whining about it will have no choice but to copy my strategy. Until then, I'm prepared for the worst." He shot me a playful wink. "Besides, our heavenly father is always watching...and no sin goes unpunished."

He was so strong that I was both impressed and a little frightened. The worthy hero versus the vengeful villain—if I were writing this story, I'd make sure the villain got a healthy dose of karma, because I had a terrible feeling that something truly shocking was about to happen. Logically, it was just a groundless fantasy...but now that I'd met someone special enough to be chosen by God, I was starting to think it could become a reality.

Sure enough, God cast down a gust of wind, a firestorm hot enough to burn.

On December 28th, 1682, there arose a great fire that would come to be known as the Oshichi Arson. Aided by dry winter winds and buildings made predominantly of wood, the blaze was said to have spread quickly. The main street was hit, and Takatoshi lost his store in the fire. Many other shops whose owners had been harassing him were also destroyed.

Well, if that doesn't sound like divine punishment, I don't know what does! Those folks were willing to stoop to cruelty in the name of protecting their precious shops, only to watch helplessly as they turned to ash anyway. And while Takatoshi was also impacted...in his case, the wind blew in his favor!

You see, Takatoshi had been wanting to expand outside of the main street and open a second shop in a new location. He would have preferred not to lose his first store, obviously, but this was an opportunity for a fresh start. After all, the stink of the "harassment" had made him lose his appetite. So, while everyone else was mourning the wreckage, he constructed a huge, brand-new store on a plot of land he had quietly purchased in Suruga-cho. And you know what else? He handed out tons of flyers that read "CASH ONLY, NO UPCHARGE" in big, bold letters!

Signs were a common sight back in those days, but no other store had thought to pass out flyers. Takatoshi was unmistakably the first in Japan to pioneer this marketing technique! With their houses and clothes all lost to the fire, the people of Edo flocked to his new store in droves. As a result, his business flourished even more, and the reason was obvious: All his products had price tags, and customers young and old alike were welcome. His rivals, who had only targeted the wealthy, could no longer hope to compete.

The harassment continued after that, right up until the moment Takatoshi's shop became the official purveyor to the shogunate, at which point it mysteriously stopped. And just as Takatoshi himself had predicted, his sales strategy would go on to become standard practice among all tradesmen. It was a sweeping victory, and I was right there, watching every step of the way.

I stayed in touch with him until the day he passed away. From my perspective, a twenty-year friendship was barely a blink, but the memories make me shiver

to this day. His life was dramatic enough to be called legendary, and watching him in action opened my eyes to what a “hero” truly looked like. In comparison, when I looked at my own life, I could see I was no hero at all.

“Order up.”

With a *thunk*, a plate was set in front of me, and an appetizing smell wafted up to my nose. It was grilled stingray fin, its yellow meat glistening beneath the gentle glow of the bare bulb.

“...So, as you can see, I realized two things: one, that my life was uneventful, and two, that I was spineless. And the revelation crushed me.”

With some difficulty, I tore off a small piece of piping-hot meat and popped it in my mouth. It was pleasantly crisp, flavored with the sweetness of mirin and a savory umami taste that spread wider the more I chewed. *Ah, the smell of charred meat...* Craving the taste of Japanese sake, I downed the rest of my drink.

“Spine, you say?” Nurarihyon glanced at me out of the corner of his eye as he sank his teeth into a slow-boiled chikuwabu. “Not sure you really need that to be a hero.”

“Of course you do! Think long and hard about it. Doesn’t the main character always have a struggle to overcome? Takatoshi, for instance, went through a great deal of hardship, but he never buckled. Instead, he overcame it with his iron will, and in return he gained prosperity. If I had to face the same challenges, it wouldn’t go nearly as well.”

I was a weak person, and I wasn’t proud of it. If I were made to go through the same harassment Takatoshi faced, I probably would have sacrificed my principles to avoid making waves. One could say that I always chose the path of least resistance.

“I’ve lived my whole life trying not to rock the boat. When I took human form, I started out in a place where I knew the customs. I didn’t want revolution; I wanted to fit in.”

Before I met Takatoshi, I believed myself to be a trailblazer. But the more

time I spent with a *real* hero, the sooner I realized how wrong I was. My sales strategy almost always stuck to the same old methods; I could never compete with Takatoshi and his cutting-edge ideas.

“In the end, he became the grandfather of one of Japan’s largest conglomerates, while I settled for managing a single general store. I failed! I had so many chances, including the advantage of nearly limitless time, and yet I never managed to be like him. Looking at the outcome, I can’t even *pretend* I’m a hero.”

With a self-deprecating smile, I poked at the fin with my fingertips. Truth be told, I never wanted to admit to my failure. As one of the many who came to Tokyo dreaming of success, I had my pride.

“Couldn’t you simply try harder to become one? Isn’t there still time?”

Nurarihyon looked glum, as though he could sense my resignation, but I shook off his sympathy. I had long since abandoned that train of thought.

“Not possible, I’m afraid! True heroes start somewhere entirely different. From the moment they’re born, they walk a separate path from mine.”

With a different starting point, the finish line was sure to be elsewhere too. The path they traveled was more treacherous than we could imagine, leading to ever greater heights, and those of us at the foot of their mountains could only watch as they climbed the peaks.

“So, I stopped trying to fight it...and meeting Shinonome and Tamaki only confirmed that I was right. They had no choice but to march through peril, and frankly, I felt sorry for them.”

I could never live like a hero. I didn’t have the strength to endure harsh trials. Plus, I had realized there was a part of myself that was complacent with stability. My life was on easy mode. Really, being a side character wasn’t so bad.

“The old me used to dream of being a hero, but now I see that being a character in a story is not nearly as fun as being the *reader*.” I gazed at Nurarihyon with a gentle smile. “A small fry like myself couldn’t possibly bring the spirits of the human world together, so don’t even try it. I’m sure you’ll find someone more qualified.”

He listened in silence, sipping sadly from his cup. “Everyone is the hero of their own story. But I suppose such platitudes wouldn’t offer you much comfort.”

“Ha ha ha! Glad you understand. Heroes are born special, and they’re a rare breed. That said, I’m sure everyone who walks the earth does have *some* role to play.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Well then, if you aren’t the main character, what are you?”

“Hmm.” I gazed into the distance and thought about which archetype would be a fitting analogy for myself. “At the very least, I’m not central to the plot... Oh, I know! I’ve got the perfect role!” I took my cell phone out of my pocket and pulled up an article from a news site. “Take a look.”

“...What’s this about? Looks like a young student getting an award.”

“Correct. The prodigy featured in this article just won the nation’s highest artistic honor at only fifteen years old.”

At the top of the article was a photo of a stony-faced teen standing in front of a beautiful painting. If he was happy to receive this award, he sure didn’t show it. His lips were curled in a frown.

“I’m told his family is very poor, with many young mouths to feed. His parents can’t afford to send him to a local trade school, let alone Tokyo University of the Arts. Can you imagine how it must feel to have so much talent but no way to pursue it? Not great, I’ll bet. When you see a door closing right in front of you, it’s hard to look at the bigger picture beyond it. He must have felt so bitter and heartbroken! Now, doesn’t that sound like precisely the sort of hurdle a hero would be asked to overcome?” Gazing down at the photo, I smiled. “In fact, I’ve offered to sponsor him.”

“...Oh, really now?” Nurarihyon blinked in surprise, then scrutinized my face. “So, you think you’re the next Daddy Warbucks, eh?”

“That’s right. I’m going to be his benefactor. Because I think he has what it takes to be a hero.”

“I see...” He looked down at the phone, then back up at me, and a

mischievous smile spread across his face. “Well, he looks like he’ll be a real ornery son of a gun. Never direct with his feelings but always keeps his word, no matter how trivial.”

Nurarihyon had never met the boy, and yet he spoke as though he already knew him. But he was right. That grouch always wore his heart on his sleeve.

“Incidentally, there’s this girl he’s known since they were both very young.”

“And she looks after him while he dedicates himself to his craft?”

“Exactly! He’s a stubborn mule of a boy, but she’s got his number. She helps him push the limits of what it means to be an artist without sacrificing his human dignity. Honestly, the amount of support she gives him is astounding. Together, they’ll make art that will end up leaving its mark on the world for generations to come, and he can’t do it without her.”

As I gushed about them, Nurarihyon beamed from ear to ear. “Sounds like Tamaki.”

“It really does, doesn’t it?”

We shared a laugh. Yes, that boy was the reincarnation of Tamaki, the man who had traded the gilded cage of immortality for the sweet release of death. Evidently the Lord of the Dead had worked overtime to bring him back to us much sooner than we dared hope.

In his past life, Tamaki was born into wealth, but now he was financially destitute. Well, I could fix that! As for whether he could become as great an artist as he’d been in his last incarnation, that was up to him...but I could at least give him a leg up. That was something even a side character like myself could manage.

“I want to be in a position where I can help those I care about—an unsung contributor. I’ll help the special people truly shine. That’s my role...as a stagehand!”

Sure, I could never be a star, but I could be part of the production crew. Even if the spotlight was destined never to fall on me, it still seemed like fun... especially if the starring role was played by none other than my former friend!

I downed my liquor in a single gulp, then let out a breath. I was glad I'd come here tonight. Now that I had reminded myself of my goals, it felt like a load off my shoulders. Yes, what I wanted most of all was to make someone else sparkle! Suppressing the urge to propose a toast, I smiled at Nurarihyon.

"It's going to get real busy soon. I'll have to raise him to be a proper artist, you know. There's no room for debate: I'm a stagehand, not a star. That's why I can't..."

"I see now... There's no room for debate! You said it! Ho ho ho!"

I flinched and recoiled as he suddenly put an arm around my shoulders. For the record, this was no loving embrace; more like what two sweaty drunk guys would do after a hard day's work. It wasn't pleasant.

I grimaced deeply. "Knock it off, will ya? I reserve hugs for pretty ladies only."

"Ho ho! My apologies. Couldn't help myself. I'm just so glad to be right!"

"Er... R-right about what...? Was it something I said?!"

I was starting to dread the worst. Nurarihyon was the type to act as soon as his mind was made up. I could only pray he hadn't gotten any crazy ideas. Then the so-called leader of the spirits turned his impassioned gaze on me.

"To be quite frank, I've never been one for the spotlight myself."

"What? Are you drunk already? Shape up! You're supposed to be our leader!"

"I am, and that's exactly my point!" He flashed his pearly whites at me. "The vast majority of my work involves mediation—building a bridge between spirits who've tragically misunderstood one another. I admit there's nothing more dramatic than conflict...but nine times out of ten, *I'm* on the sidelines. Thus, am I not also a 'stagehand,' Toochika, my boy?"

"Well, yes, but...I mean..."

Looking back, I should have known. Though Nurarihyon carried the lofty title of leader, the spirits didn't serve him. At most, they went crying to him whenever there was trouble. He didn't have underlings like a mob boss. Even if he did manage to solve their problems, he didn't stand to gain anything at all.

He was right—he was a stagehand! Why had I thought his work was fitting of

a hero? Had I merely assumed from his title that his duties were grandiose?

“I...I’m sure it must be a struggle...”

I could feel my smile stiffening, so I quickly turned away. My gut was telling me not to make eye contact under any circumstances. One wrong move and he would pull me into a torrential river of annoying busywork!

But as I was sweating bullets, he suddenly leaned in close. “Now, Toochika, don’t you think you’re a perfect fit for such a role? You know the human world inside and out, and you have an abundance of their currency. Sure, maybe you pale in comparison to one of the nation’s greatest corporate groups, but your influence is immeasurable. Besides, don’t they say in the human world that money can solve any problem?”

Why didn’t I leave when I had the chance?! Frankly, I wanted to bolt on the spot, but my limbs had gone numb from all the time we’d spent sitting here in the cold. Neither the oden stew nor the lukewarm booze could warm me up now. That’s it, no more run-down food stalls for me! Classy bars all the way!

“Er... M-maybe. Anyway, uh, I think I ought to head out...”

Mentally calculating how long it would take to reach my favorite cigar bar, I rose to my feet with a civil smile. Then I reached into my pocket to take out my wallet...but Nurarihyon grabbed me by the arm. “Don’t be a wet blanket! It’s my treat tonight. Let’s talk some more!”

He was grinning from ear to ear, and I gagged when his boozy breath hit my nose. I was now viscerally reminded of the fact that I was seated next to a drunk old fogey. *Ugh, what a waste of my life! I refuse to spend the night with some old man!*

“Well, I...I’m afraid we don’t have much else to talk about!” I pulled my arm away, trying to escape his grasp, but his hand refused to budge, as if it were a suction cup.

“Oh, there’s *pleeeeeeenty* to talk about! We could start with that Tsuchigumo-fox conflict. The motives behind it are littered across the spirit and human worlds!”

“I don’t care! I don’t want to hear it!”

As he tried to move the conversation along, I sang “LA LA LA LA!” to drown out his voice. The food stall owner was hiding behind his newspaper, but I could see it shaking. *Is he laughing at me? Having a merry old time while the guy who insulted his stall gets his comeuppance?! Look, I’m sorry, okay?! Just save me from this boozy bastard!*

Sadly, no one was there to offer this pathetic wretch his salvation.

“Now, let’s settle in for a long talk. Two bottles of hot sake, Boss! This is going to be a long night...”

“No! I’m going home! I have a pretty lady waiting for me!”

“Ho ho ho! A bald-faced lie. I heard you two broke up just the other day... Oh, by the way, I thought of a title for you, since I figured you’d need one! How about ‘Boss of the Human World Spirits’? Pretty cool, right? Like something out of a classic noir film!”

“Ugh, that’s so lame! NOOOOO! I refuse to let that name spread!”

“What’s so bad about it? It’ll follow you for the rest of your life!”

“Spare meeee!” I whined, slumping my shoulders.

He still laughed happily. “You’re a stagehand, after all. Might as well make the most of it with a flashy title.”

No! You don’t get it at all! Tears sprang to my eyes, but he scarcely seemed to notice. If anything, he looked downright delighted to saddle me with this thankless job. *Damn it, how did this happen? I’ll never let you have your way!* I vowed silently. *I refuse to be the kind of stagehand who’s all work and no play!*

Sadly, Nurarihyon was far more thorough than I’d expected, and people were already calling me “Boss of the Human World Spirits” by the following week. What a nightmare! Can you imagine how I felt when I heard them say “Hey there, Boss,” with snotty smirks on their faces?! I bet you can’t!

In the end, Nurarihyon had successfully redefined my identity. From that point on, this “Boss” went around helping solve all sorts of problems...but that’s a story for another day.

Chapter 6:

The Final Day

AS MY EYES slowly fluttered open, I saw a glowing butterfly float right past my face. When I extended a hand, it landed on my finger, scattering its phosphorescent light. Then, after opening and closing its wings a few times, it suddenly took off again.

I exhaled quietly. *Must have dozed off on the porch.* Beside me was a sleeping Nyaa-san curled up next to Kuro; it looked like the cat-dog duo had joined me in my nap. Gently, I laid my blanket over them.

My eyes were still heavy with sleep, so I rubbed them a little. It felt like I'd been taking a lot of midday naps lately. Maybe it was because I kept waking up in the night...but if so, there wasn't much I could do to fix it. *Oh, dearie me,* I thought to myself with a self-deprecating smile.

Looking up at the sky, I could see innumerable stars twinkling down at me. The fluctuating colors of the spring sky were just lovely. Then my gaze shifted to a flying onmoraki silhouetted by the moon. Wasn't it a bit late for the "herald of springtime" to show up? There'd been so much rain lately that I was sure summer was already upon us.

Maybe it slept through its alarm, or maybe it's lost. Poor thing, I bet it must be lonely. I hope it finds its flock.

Just then, I heard a page turning. "Oh!" I looked over and chuckled. A certain someone was deeply engrossed in a book, his brown eyes sweeping over every letter on the page. The lantern beside him was glowing faintly, its yellow light flickering as the butterflies flapped their wings, making his snow-white hair gleam gold.

What are you reading, Suimei? I peeked at the book's spine and was startled to see the name Shiba Ryoutarou. He was reading *Butterfly Dreams*, a historical novel criticizing the class system from the perspective of a doctor during the turmoil of the Tokunaga regime.

That book had been one of Shinonome-san's favorites, but Suimei shot him down when he originally recommended it, saying it was "too complicated." I could still remember how crushed Shinonome-san had looked after that.

To think someone who used to find books boring was now reading Shiba Ryoutarou... Clearly Suimei had put in a lot of effort. The thought warmed my heart, and I could feel myself smiling uncontrollably. For some reason it made me want to be near him, so I began to shift along the edge of the porch, inching closer.

"What is it, Kaori?"

All of a sudden, those soft eyes were fixed on me, and I pouted. *Mission failed*. Evidently the former exorcist still possessed a sharp radar. "Just wondering if it's a good book," I replied innocently.

I didn't dare admit I wanted to feel his warmth—that would be too embarrassing. He took one look at my bright smile, let out a sigh, and closed the book. Then he reached out and placed his hand on mine. His skin was cold, but I could feel the heat at its core... Somehow, he always knew exactly what I really wanted.

"I'd say it's pretty good. It's fascinating to watch someone who grew up in stagnant Edo gain a new perspective through Western medicine. It shows how people flung into a violently changing era can be as powerless as fallen leaves in a river, despite being the same people who created that era. They may *seem* to lack power, but they actually support the system." His eyes seemed to twinkle as he gazed into the distance. "With the world full of bias and hypocrisy, and a thin line between dreams and reality... No wonder he thought of himself as a butterfly."

"Butterfly Dreams..."

I thought about the title the author had given his work. There was a scene in which one character proclaimed himself to be a butterfly at the top of his lungs, a metaphor that originated from the story of ancient Chinese philosopher Souchi. It was used to refer to the blurry boundary between dreams and reality...or, sometimes, the ephemeral nature of life.

"Honestly, I kinda get it."

“Get what?”

“Wanting to be a butterfly.”

And at that exact moment, as if on cue, a glimmerfly fluttered past. With so many humans living in our house, the repellent incense couldn't fully conceal us, so there were always a few of them hanging around. Glimmerflies dearly loved humans, but they would eventually burn out—beautiful, yet fleeting.

“Who can say for sure that what I see as reality isn't just a butterfly's dream?” I wondered aloud...and a split second later, I was overcome with embarrassment. *Ugh, that was the dumbest thing I've ever said! Suimei's going to think I'm a ditz! He's always telling me to think before I speak!*

Nervously, I looked up at him...and my heart skipped a beat. He wasn't smiling or shaking his head. Instead, his eyes were as calm as a tranquil lake, waiting for me to continue. “You were saying?”

“Oh...um...” Apparently, he was willing to put up with my silliness. My heart began to race. Clearing my throat, I slowly began to untangle the mess of feelings in my chest. “Lately, I've been thinking...ever since I met you, time has been passing way too quickly.”

The moment I saw that boy lying unconscious and bleeding out in the rain, I feared that Shinonome-san had killed him. My first impression of him was the absolute worst; I could still remember how his rudeness had infuriated me. But the next thing I knew, he was always right there, ready to support me whenever I stumbled headfirst into trouble.

When had I first started to think of him as irreplaceable? I wasn't quite sure. Perhaps it was that time he comforted me, or perhaps the first time we shared a laugh making small talk. Before I knew it, I started feeling anxious whenever he wasn't around. His presence in my life was different from Shinonome-san's; at some point he had tucked himself snugly into an empty spot that no one else could possibly fill.

I'd never imagined I would find someone like him. Not only that, but we got married! I still couldn't believe it!

“Do you ever feel like life is just a long walk through a patch of fog?”

We could rarely see where we were headed, and every step came with the risk of tripping up. Nevertheless, we timidly inched forward, uncertain whether we were on the right path. Of course, there was no such thing as a single “right” path, yet we kept anxiously looking around for it all the same.

“After all that time wandering through the dull white haze, it feels like a miracle that we found each other.”

His expression softened. “A miracle, huh?” he asked with a meaningful smile.

“What?” I scoffed.

“Not sure I agree, myself... To me, it feels like fate.”

His words caught me entirely off guard, and my face flushed. *God, this is why I can never relax around you!* He would always ambush me with the most cliché one-liners whenever I was least expecting it. Worse, he didn’t even know he was doing it! But this was no time to blush. Clearing my throat, I shifted gears.

“I can’t see it that way. After walking across an endless desert, what are your chances of reaching down and finding a gold nugget in your first fistful of sand?”

The time I spent with Suimei was like sunlight filtering through the trees: warm and gentle, unmistakably real, but not something I could reach out and grasp with my hands. Though it would fade with the passing seasons, I had faith that it would return one day. That was the sort of bond we shared.

“I’m just so lucky, it doesn’t feel real... Actually, it seems like a miracle that a human like me was allowed to live in the spirit realm at all.”

I had never thought of myself as special, but the circumstances of my life were inarguably unique. It was so strange to me—fascinating and frightening in equal measure.

“Part of me wonders what would happen if I woke up one day to find I was someone else. For instance... Well, what if the life I’ve lived is just a passing dream of my toddler self as she drowned in that river? What if I was destined to die mere seconds later?”

In the distant past, a relative of mine supposedly pushed me into the rapids.

That was how I originally came to the spirit realm: delivered by human malice. By all accounts, I should have died...or maybe I *did*. Was that why I felt this way?

“The thought scares me, so...I feel like I can relate to the idea of butterfly dreams. Silly, isn’t it?”

I let out a laugh. Ever since dear Nyaa-san first told me my origin story, I’d felt a vague sense of unease, and lately it had been getting even stronger. But why? If I was happy, then why should I worry about whether I was living in reality? It was so absurd, and yet I couldn’t shake the intrusive thoughts. Maybe everyone had a phase like this at some point in their lives.

“Tell me, is it wrong to think about these things?” I asked, smiling weakly.

Suimei turned away from me, gazing down at the ground in thought. Eventually an idea came to him, and he turned back to press a hand to my forehead. “Maybe you’re sick.”

“Hey, I’m not a child!” I glared at him. I didn’t appreciate him treating me like I was delirious!

He shrugged. “Even I would never treat you like a kid.”

“Well, I...!”

“That being said...hmm. You don’t seem to have a fever...” Next, he touched my neck. It tickled, but I put up with it. Then he turned his somber gaze away. “Your lymph nodes feel a bit swollen, and your pulse is racing.”

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. Did you take your meds?”

“Of course I did, and they tasted *awful*!”

“Okay then.” Smiling faintly, he took my hand and rubbed his thumb over the back of it. “Personally...I don’t want to think this could be a dream,” he whispered, running his cold fingers over my skin again and again, as if to make sure I was really there. “If this is a dream I’m having in a coffin six feet underground, then I hope I never wake again.”

I gasped. His gruesome past probably made him cherish this reality more than anyone else. His life before he came to the spirit realm had been anything but

blessed. “I’m so sorry,” I apologized quickly.

Suimei smiled sheepishly. “It’s fine.” He gently pulled his hand away and looked at me. The penetrating stare of his golden-brown eyes gazing deep into mine made my heart skip a beat. “Everyone starts to get a little pessimistic when they’re feeling weak.”

“I’m weak?”

“Well, you’ve been taking a lot of naps, so I figured you’re a little under the weather. Probably stressed. You shouldn’t push yourself.”

“Hmmm...” I tilted my head. Sure, I’d been having trouble sleeping, but I couldn’t think of any other obvious health problems. “There’s nothing wrong, though. I’m fine, see?” I flexed my (nonexistent) bicep.

He let out a dramatic sigh. “You can be such an airhead. Do you have any self-awareness at all?”

“Nnngh! I...I think so...”

“No, you don’t. After all, today’s...”

Just then, a flurry of footsteps erupted behind us. We whirled around and caught sight of a familiar face peeking into the living room.

“Hey, I’m not too late, am I? I made it, right? Thank goodness!” It was Noname, looking panicked with sweat beading on her forehead. Carrying a cloth bundle in one hand, she rushed over to us and crouched down with a smile. “Kaori, I finished the kimono just in time! Let’s have you try it on!”

I blinked back at her. “But I told you it wasn’t an emergency! It’s not a big deal.” Yes, I’d asked Noname to sew me a kimono for today’s occasion, but I wouldn’t have minded if she needed more time.

She shook her head. “Today’s a turning point for you. You absolutely *must* look your best!” Her lips curled into a gentle, loving smile.

She had a point, of course. Today was something of a special day. “Weeell...if you say so...”

“Good, because it turned out *fabulous*! Suimei, bring me a changing divider!”

“Settle down, slave driver...”

“Quit grumbling and hurry up!”

As Noname and Suimei bickered back and forth, I quietly opened the cloth. Instantly, an uncommon scent rose to greet me. Inside was a silk summer houmongi, the kind of kimono reserved for semi-formal occasions. The color was pale and cool-toned, and the fabric was gauzy. It was a bit too fancy to wear around the house, but it felt just right for a “turning point” day.

“You’re going to look beautiful. I’ll style your hair too. Come on, Kaori.”

I walked over to Noname, and her slender and supple fingers grazed my cheek. I could smell her familiar, flowery scent, an unusual fragrance that bridged the divide between ordinary and extraordinary.

“Oh, Kaori, you’re positively radiant!”

Leave it to Noname to get me fully dressed in a matter of moments. The gauzy silk was a treat for the eyes and fun to rustle. Traditional garb was more constricting than Western attire, and I found myself standing with my head held a little higher than usual. I’d fallen in love with this fabric the moment I saw it at the store, but as I watched Noname style my hair in the mirror, my jaw dropped.

“I was worried it would be a little plain, but...it’s so *fitting!*” I whispered in awe.

Noname grinned at me in the mirror’s reflection. “Well, duh. This shade is perfect for a woman of your years.”

At this, I gazed at myself in the mirror. *Yeah...I guess I’m getting to that age.* My hair was peppered with streaks of white, there were visible wrinkles at the corners of my eyes, and my skin had lost its elasticity. Indeed, most of these changes were for the worse, and I found myself longing for days gone by with increasing frequency.

The moment I touched a finger to my wrinkles, I felt my mood turn sour...but then it sprang right back up again.

No matter how I changed, I was still me. Why bother getting upset about

wrinkles? They were a testament to the life I'd lived, and they let me rock a style of kimono that my younger self never could have pulled off. Wasn't that just lovely?

"Oh dear! I look *ravishing*, if I do say so myself. Whatever will I do if Suimei falls in love with me all over again?" I joked with a grin.

Suimei heard this and blushed faintly. "Don't be absurd, you...you idiot."

"Awww, he's blushing! Tee hee hee!"

In response to my teasing, he turned away in a huff. Of course, he had changed a lot too, going from a princely boy to a stubborn old man. With each passing year he got grumpier and grumpier, and to this day the naughty neighbor kids feared him as the "old man apothecary."

"So, this new kimono. Honestly, what do you think?" I asked him with a smug smile.

He began to fidget. "It...it looks good on you." Even at his age, he was still as awkward as a teenager.

"Good, good," I nodded, satisfied. "I ordered one for you too. Let's wear them out on a date sometime."

"Oh...o-okay..."

"Maybe we could tour castles in the human world! Those historical novels get more and more appealing every year, don't they? I've been wanting to check out the book that one period drama's based on! And we could visit all the different filming locations while we make some deliveries. Oooh, and I could go for a quick dip in a hot spring. Plus, I want to get some street food... We really should travel more and take advantage of our exclusive transportation method!"

Hell could take us anywhere we wanted to go. And by riding on my best friend, it didn't cost a cent! *Eeee, I'm excited already!*

"Good grief. Age hasn't changed you one bit, has it?" Noname sighed.

Grinning, I flashed her a peace sign. This old granny was still a kid at heart! "Yeah, I can tell I'm only getting more powerful with each passing year. Now if

only *Suimei* could understand that...”

“Nngh...” He swiftly averted his eyes. “Look, I just think you should act your age. You’ve got a bad habit of going overboard.”

“Oh, really? But there’s so much we’re still capable of! Just because we’re getting old doesn’t mean we should just sit around!” I pushed back firmly.

“Yeah...that’s true,” he conceded wryly. His gaze drifted down slightly as he let out a lengthy sigh. Then he took a long, hard look at me. “Still...we can’t stay the same way forever, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” My breath caught in my throat for a moment, but I quickly put on a smile and rose to my feet. “I love it, Noname! It’s the perfect outfit for today’s special occasion!”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Come to think of it, you’ve done so much for me all these years... From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much.”

My heartfelt gratitude sent tears springing to her eyes. “I’m your *mother*, dummy. Why *wouldn’t* I do it?”

“Hee hee hee! True. You’re my mom, and that will never change.”

As I giggled, she reached out and cupped my cheek. “All your hard work finally ends today. Congratulations.”

My heart ached, and my eyes grew damp. I quickly shook my head. “Thanks, but it still doesn’t feel real to me.”

“That’s normal. It’s been your life’s work, after all. I’m sure it’s hard to let go.”

“Yeah...”

Only then did I finally realize that I *was* feeling weak. No wonder I kept thinking of butterfly dreams. After all...

“It just feels so strange to retire from running the bookstore.”

I gently placed a hand on my chest. Saying it aloud felt *wrong* somehow.

“You okay?” *Suimei* stepped closer to support me.

“I’m fine,” I lied, but I grabbed his hand before I could stop myself. “Gotta do things right and finish on a high note! Hard to believe I won’t be running the store after today...”

Decades had passed since I first inherited the place from Shinonome-san, and it was a miracle I’d kept it going this long. Part of me felt like I didn’t need to step down just yet, but...for the bookstore’s sake, I knew it was time to pass the torch. Just as there were certain things only I could accomplish, the same was true of the next generation. I couldn’t stay here forever, not if I wanted this place to survive long after I was gone.

“Guess I’d better bow out gracefully!” I grinned, flashing my pearly whites. I was going to do my very best work...one last time.

I slid open the door connecting the store and the living room.

“Ah, is it time already?”

There, I came face-to-face with the grump who was setting up shop. His short-sleeved kosode was wrinkled, and fatigue was etched into the lines of his face. Stubble peppered his slender chin.

“Yorutsuki...?” My heart skipped a beat. Though the two of them had never met, he was somehow a mirror image of my late father.

“Are you feeling ready now, Mom?” He scratched his head and let out a yawn. *Obviously sleep-deprived.*

“I’m fine, but what about you? It’s going to be busy today.”

“No worries. I’m all set.”

Sure enough, the store shelves were neat and tidy. Despite all his protests, my eldest was a hard worker. “Okay, then.”

With a knowing smile, I walked through the store, casually peering around. The walls were lined with shelves packed so full of books that I could smell the ink from here. Their spines were faded, but they still held the love poured into them by their authors, and so they waited eagerly for someone to come and pick them up.

Each and every book on these shelves held sentimental value to me. One was a recommendation by so-and-so, while another was so beloved that it had taken years to get it back from the last person who borrowed it... My emotions swelled with every step. Even after all this time, I still loved this place. I had spent half a century here. The spirit realm bookstore was my life.

"Hey, Kaori!"

I could almost hear my father's voice calling for me. I turned, and the memories sprang up again in the back of my mind.

"This damn manuscript is taking forever. If Tamaki shows up, think of an excuse and get rid of him for me!"

Oh, those were the days. He was always glaring down at the paper in front of him.

"Shinonome, I keep telling you, quit staying up all night to read books!"

"Lay off, would you? I run a bookstore. Of course I'm gonna read!"

"Well, you're setting a bad example for Kaori! What if she turns into a bookworm like you?!"

My foster mother Noname would always bicker with him. Alas, a bookworm was *exactly* what I turned into.

"Kaori, let's get these deliveries over with already. I don't have all day, you know."

Then there was Nyaa-san. Despite her grumbling, she took me all over Japan.

"You're going there just to deliver one single book? Are you out of your mind?!"

"Eeegh... Even I'm not so sure about this..."

Suimei was always there to push back against my worst ideas, and Kuro helped as much as he could.

"Kaori, don't push yourself too hard. You don't have to do it all on your own."

Sometimes I was so busy with work that Shinonome-san reached out to check in with me. I could remember how reassured I felt whenever he stroked my hair

with those big hands of his. We would deliver books one by one, then use that hard-earned money to buy more books. It was just my dad and me, working together to keep the store alive.

“...Mom?” Yorutsuki called out from behind me. He must have seen me standing there quivering.

No, it's too early to cry. We haven't even opened the store yet, for Pete's sake.
“I'm okay, don't worry.”

Quickly composing myself, I put a hand on the sliding door. We needed to hurry and open for business. I grasped the now-outdated rotary lock and twisted it until it clicked open. Then, with some effort, I flung the front door open...

“CONGRATULATIONS!”

Suddenly, a harmony of voices flooded over me. My jaw dropped, and I froze. Outside the bookstore was a massive crowd of spirits, the likes of which I had never seen!

“Sooo, I heard this is your last day on the job! How could you not invite me?! If I'd known, I would've bought you a way better bouquet!”

“Seriously... We'll have to get together later, just the three of us...”

Together, Konoha the fox and Tsukiko the tanuki thrust a giant bouquet of flowers into my arms.

“Goodness, now don't you dare cut in line. *I'm* Kaori's favorite, obviously.” Fuguruma-youbi peeked out from the crowd. With a sidelong glance, she thrust a fan in front of Konoha and Tsukiko to stop them. “Now that you're retiring, you'll have plenty of time on your hands. Chat with me about romance novels sometime, won't you, bestie?”

She shot me a wink, and I heard a man swoon in the distance. Evidently Kami-oni was still susceptible to Fuguruma-youbi's charms.

“Uhhh...?” I looked around in confusion as familiar faces continued to step forward.

“Have some of our candy on the house. I hope you'll keep buying from us

during your retirement!” Noppera-bo, the faceless woman, gave me a box of sweets.

“You used to be so tiny, but now look at you! I feel so old.” The fishmonger gave me some dried sardines.

“Congratulations. Proud of you... Come see the ocean again sometime.” Umi Zato, the fisherman, showered me in seafood.

“Congrats.” Karakasa-niisan shyly gifted me a bright red paper parasol.

“Ho ho! This is from the entire tanuki clan,” said Shibaemon-tanuki, there with the other two Great Tanuki of Japan.

“A small token from everyone in the kamuy kotan!” Kim-un-aynu’s hairy face crumpled into a smile as he handed over seafood from Hokkaido.

“Congratulations, and enjoy your retirement! This is from me and Mom.” I didn’t recognize the young male oni until I saw our old neighbor Otoyosan the Kijo spirit standing next to him. Her little baby was all grown up!

In a blink, my arms were at max capacity, and the presents completely blocked my view. “Oh...um...I see you’ve all come to celebrate... Well, I...”

Just then, as I struggled to retain my composure, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Suimei. “Our family’s here. See?”

“Huh?” Startled, I looked around...and saw Kinme and Ginme standing nearby.

“Congrats, Kaori!”

“Haruka and the other kids are here too...all to celebrate your big day!”

Next to the twins, I could see my two daughters Haruka and Natsuki, plus all of *their* children! Haruka was the first to step forward.

“Congrats on your retirement, Mom!” Sniffling, she gently took my hand. “Thank you so much for all of your hard work over the years. You’re the reason we all love books.”

“...Huh?”

Just then, Yorutsuki walked out front. “Tons of spirits would never have had the chance to touch a book if it weren’t for you, Mom. They might have died

not even knowing what a story was. Books...stories...they enrich our hearts, and it'd be sad to spend your whole life without them, so..."

He patted Haruka on the shoulder. Her eyes darted around nervously for a moment, and then she declared: "Thank you for giving people stories. Thank you for enriching their hearts. Your hard work is over now, Mom. You've earned the right to kick back with a good book!"

My vision blurred with tears, and my heart ached like it was in a vise. My work...enriched people's hearts? It sounded like a joke, and I found it hard to believe. All I ever wanted was to share my passion with others. Surely she was exaggerating, right?

And yet...not a single spirit in the crowd spoke up to disagree. All of them gazed at me warmly, happily, with gratitude in their eyes. Hot tears spilled down my cheeks, and I let out a sob.

"Th-thank you..."

I couldn't tell you when exactly I first fell in love with books—they just captivated me with their charm in a blink. Not wanting a single soul to miss out on the magic, I gave everything I had to my work at the bookstore.

Sometimes I worried I was being too pushy. Other times, I feared that not everyone would be able to appreciate books like I did. But now, looking at this crowd, I knew my children were right. There were so many spirits who had come to love stories. The proof was right in front of me!

"Thank you all for loving these books!" I shouted to them, my throat raw.

"NO, THANK *YOU*!" they shouted back in unison, and my heart skipped a beat.

"Oh, this is...just so incredible...!"

It felt as though my life's passion had been validated, and I couldn't help but smile. Next to me, Suimei was smiling too. I was so lucky, so *blessed*... My body felt warm and fuzzy. How long had it been since I last felt this good? Almost like it was a dream... I could scarcely believe this was real.

At that exact moment, a single butterfly rose from my chest.

No, it was just a passing butterfly that happened to graze past my body. And

yet...

“Butterfly dreams...”

In an instant, fear raced through my chest. The creature was so beautiful and so frightening at the same time, I couldn't tear my eyes away...

“...It's raining!”

“Yikes! Let's take this party inside, everyone!”

As if on cue, hazy showers began to pour down on us, and the crowd of spirits scattered like baby spiders.

“Kaori, let's go back inside... Kaori?”

I could hear Suimei calling, but I didn't answer right away. Something was telling me to watch and see where the butterfly went. As it weaved through the rain, several more butterflies were drawn to it, twirling around it like ballroom dancers and scattering phosphorescent specks. Instead of taking shelter from the storm, they flew higher and higher, bolting straight into the sky...and when they reached the highest point, they crumbled to dust.

I stared blankly at the last lingering traces of their short lives, the tiny glimmers of light among the raindrops, but soon they were washed away in the torrent. The sound of the water echoed in my ears, the warm drops on my face a herald of summer. I could smell the rain mingling with the earth...the smell of reality.

This was not as fanciful as a dream, nor as well tailored as a fantasy. This was a blend of all things together, the scent of fresh life.

It's real... It's really real...!

As it finally sank in, I felt hot tears welling up. The rain had stopped; it was just a passing shower, and the sky was already clearing as the eternally pretty stars began to peek through the thinning clouds. Sniffling, I stood firm...and with a deep breath, I finally turned to my husband.

“Let's go back into the store, Suimei!”

The man I loved was looking at me with concern. Smiling, I gave thanks for everything I had gained in this lifetime, him included.

“My heart just feels so full. Sorry for worrying you.”

This made him frown. With a heavy sigh, he put a hand to my forehead once again. “Are you *sure* you’re not sick?”

“I’m telling you, I’m *fiiiine*! Stop treating me like a child!” I protested loudly, and he held up his hands in surrender. “Good! Now, maybe we could have a surprise sale to celebrate my retirement!” I suggested offhandedly as I sauntered back inside.

At this, the sharp-eared spirits began to clamor.

“Did you hear that?! Oh boy, I’m gonna borrow so many books!”

“Are you serious?! But I don’t have any money!”

“Oh my gosh, maybe this is my chance to try a new genre...”

“YES! Where are the new releases?! I’m gonna borrow *everything* that came out this month!”

Just like that, the customers were in an uproar. The only person who looked upset was Yorutsuki, the man in charge. “Mom, you can’t be serious! We have enough customers today as it is!”

Sure enough, there was already a line of them at the register. I watched with a smile as my son scurried around. “Don’t worry, I’ll help you! I just want to put books in the hands of as many spirits as I can!”

That was the mission of the spirit realm bookstore, after all: to deliver books to the spirits, to teach them about stories, and to enrich their hearts. So we really didn’t have a single second to waste!

“Step right up to the spirit realm bookstore! We’re under new management, but we’re still open for business. We’ve got books new and old from every corner of the world, so give us a shout if you see something you like! We look forward to doing business with you!”

The End



Short Story Collection

Three short stories written separately from the novel series,
hand-picked by Shinobumaru-sensei, and edited and
compiled with an author's note at the end of each one!

Extra:

Short Story Collection

Three short stories written separately from the novel series, hand-picked by Shinobumaru-sensei, and edited and compiled with an author's note at the end of each one!

Short Story: The Second Suimei

W_{HAT. IS. HAPPENING?!}

One perfectly, utterly ordinary afternoon, I was in a panic. Two boys stood in front of me, both shooting furtive glances at each other with perplexed looks on their faces.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but...could you tell me your names, for starters?”

At this, they both scowled in annoyance, then announced in unison: “Spare me your stupid questions! My name is Shirai Suimei!”

They were so identical that I could feel a headache coming on. *Can someone please explain this before I go crazy?!*

Yes, you guessed it: I was face-to-face with two Suimeis.

My family ran a bookstore in the spirit realm, the shadowy underbelly of the human world where spirits dwelled. Here, the bizarre was commonplace and the illogical was mundane. I was always finding new surprises even though I’d lived in this world from an early age, so when there were suddenly two of Suimei, I figured it must be normal for humans to duplicate themselves here. That was why I brought them home with me to my foster father Shinonome-san, hoping he could point me toward a solution.

Unfortunately...

“Rrgghh! What the hell is this?! Why is this happening?!”

Shinonome-san clutched at his hair. Apparently human duplication was *not*, in fact, a normal event in the spirit realm.

“Fascinating. Well, lucky you, Kaori...you’ll be getting double the rent!” exclaimed Nyaa-san, the black cat. As usual, she wasn’t ruffled in the least. Yes,

we were charging Suimei rent to live in our house, but it was kind of rude to say that right in front of him...er, them.

“So, when will I go back to normal?” the Suimeis asked in unison as they sat side by side. Then they turned and glared at each other.

“Don’t copy me, you phony!”

“*You’re* the phony, you phony!”

“Oh, good grief...”

They looked just about ready to leap down each other’s throats, each of them fully convinced that he was the real Suimei. What were we to do?!

“It’s probably just a tanuki or fox mimicking his form. Ignore him,” Shinonome-san spat irritably, puffing on his pipe.

“Oh, of course! I didn’t think of that. I knew I could count on the realm’s leading spirit expert!”

The praise put a pleased smile on my foster father’s face. Without missing a beat, I followed up with a question:

“So, is there a way to tell which one is the mimic?”

“Well...”

Now that he was in a good mood, he was more than happy to tell me how to expose a spirit’s true form. It wasn’t hard: You just needed to ask them something an impostor wouldn’t know the answer to. *Sounds easy enough*, I thought.

That belief lasted for a few minutes at most.

“How do you both know all the right answers?!”

I stared down at the identical quizzes with identical perfect scores, then flew into a rage and tore them both to shreds. This was no help at all!

“Maybe it’s not a tanuki or fox after all,” Shinonome-san mused.

“Perhaps it’s a doppelgänger?” Nyaa-san suggested.

“Now *that’s* a stretch. If it were a doppelgänger, the real Suimei would be

dead,” I retorted.

“Then what is it? I can’t think of any other ways to find out,” she shot back.

“*Hmmm,*” we murmured in harmony.

Just like that, we had hit a dead end. At this rate, we’d never find the answer! How were we supposed to provide for two Suimeis? I mean, obviously I was happy to charge double rent, but...

Hold on a sec. It would be a pretty big revenue stream... Waaaait a minute, maybe this is a good thing after all!

But right before the problem could reach a complete standstill, a new wrinkle was added by the last person I would’ve expected.

“Something feels...strange.”

It was none other than Suimei himself...or one of them, anyway. The other watched in surprise as he walked right up to me. No one had expected the victim to do anything, and now all eyes were on him.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Don’t move.” A split second later, he drew his face close to mine.

HE’S SO CLOSE!!! My cheeks flared, and I flinched. His unfriendly attitude made it easy to forget just how handsome he was...seriously, he could be a model or something. His skin was flawless, and his hair was as white as snow. He seemed less like a human being and more like a prince who stepped out of a fairy tale.

“Wha-wha-wha-wha-what is it?! Is something wrong?!”

Not that I had special feelings for Suimei or anything like that. But he was in my personal bubble, and the only other boys my age who’d gotten this close to me were Kinme and Ginme. I just wasn’t used to it.

“This can’t be right.” Cupping my chin, he narrowed his brown eyes in displeasure.

“Will you please EXPLAIN?!”

AAAAAAHHH!!! I can’t take this anymore!!! I was saving my first chin-cup for

marriage!!! I raised my foot and got ready to stomp his, but his very next words stopped me dead in my tracks.

“Where’s that sunspot you were complaining about the other day?”

“...What? A sunspot? On my face?”

“Yeah.”

Sunspot (noun): a flat, smooth brown spot, often occurring on the face. Wait, this is no time for dictionary definitions! “What are you talking about?” My smile evaporated as I grabbed him by the collar.

Frowning slightly, he finally explained. “A few days ago, I found you crying in front of the mirror because you noticed a huge sunspot on your face.”

He said I’d thrown a huge tantrum about my skincare routine and needing to buy new foundation, and he remembered it clearly...but I sure didn’t!

“Aha! You! *You* must be the impostor!” I glared back at him haughtily. I would never get a sunspot on my face! “I’m only twenty years old, you know. My skin is soft and smooth! I’m way too young to get spots!” I scoffed.

He wearily returned my stare. “Oh, for crying out loud. Lying about our age now, are we?”

“Excuse me? Don’t be stupid. Of course I’m twenty!”

“That’s a lie! You told me you were twenty-two!”

“...What?”

If this were some kind of joke, it didn’t make sense. For a moment, I stared at him...but as far as I could tell, his brown eyes held only sincerity. *Wait, what?* His expression was so serious that I started to wonder if I could have somehow aged two years without realizing it.

“No, no, no, that can’t be possible.”

I had my ditzy moments, but even I couldn’t possibly forget my own age! *Seriously, buddy, if you’re gonna lie, you’d better try harder than that!*

“...Huh?” Just then, something felt off to me...so I grabbed his face with both hands.

“Gah! The hell are you doing?!”

“Just shut up for a second.” I examined his handsome features up close. He was unmistakably identical to the Suimei I knew, but...something about him was different...

“K-Kaori! Be careful when you touch him!” the other Suimei warned me, anxiety dancing in his eyes as he watched intently. Now *that* was the usual him.

“...Oh.” I realized what was off right away. “This fake Suimei has a bigger Adam’s apple. Plus, his voice is a tiny bit lower, and he’s a little thinner. He feels...I don’t know...more grown up?”

“Really? You sure?” asked a skeptical Shinonome-san.

“Wait, seriously? Now it’s getting interesting!” Nyaa-san purred.

The two of them walked over and circled the fake Suimei to examine him from every angle...but...

“Nope, I can’t tell. To a cat’s eyes, you humans all look the same.”

“Honestly, I can’t tell either...”

They murmured in confusion. *C’mon, guys, just look a bit harder!*

“Trust me, he’s a little different...take a good look! The Suimei we know has a ‘soft boy’ look to him. He’s not mature like this one. That’s how we know this is the fake!”

I smirked at them, confident that I’d solved the mystery. But a moment later, the wind was taken from my sails as I realized the other Suimei looked skeptical at best...and Shinonome-san and Nyaa-san were practically falling asleep!

“Heeey, at least hear me out when I’m explaining my reasoning!”

I had kind of enjoyed the feeling of being the hero of a detective story, but now I was crushed. In response to my whining, I heard the world’s largest sigh... from Fake Suimei. “To be quite honest, I’m starting to think *you people* might be the fakes here.”

“What do you mean?”

He glared at each of us in turn, then pointed directly in my face and declared:

“Of course I’m *mature*, dammit! I’m twenty-four years old!”

“What?” everyone reacted in unison.

He looked around restlessly. “I know for a fact that I’m no impostor. This bookstore is exactly like I remember it. And yet for some reason there’s an age difference...” He tilted his head in confusion.

“Maybe you’re...from a parallel world,” Shinonome-san suggested hesitantly. “That would explain why there’s two of you.”

“He’s from a parallel world?!” As in, a hypothetical alternate world that branched off at an unknown point? According to Shinonome-san, he really could have come from a place like that. “Th-that means...he’s not a fake after all?” I asked.

“Correct. He’s technically the real Suimei; he’s just not *our* Suimei.”

“Whoaaaa... That’s amazing!” *Just like a sci-fi novel! Eeeee!* “So, tell me, what am I like in your world?!” I asked him eagerly.

The fake (er...I guess not so fake?) Suimei responded with a frown. “Basically the same. Loud, obnoxious, no boundaries...”

“Grrrrr! How rude! Would it kill you to say at least one nice thing?!” I pouted my lips. Now I felt sorry for parallel me!

“I bet she works me like a dog in *your* world too,” Nyaa-san sighed, gazing mournfully into the distance.

“You could say that, yeah,” Fake Suimei said to her with pity in his eyes.

Ouch! Am I really that much of a slave driver?! But as I started to second-guess my entire personality, an icy voice cut through the lighthearted mood in the room.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” said Suimei (er, the seventeen-year-old...ugh, this is complicated). He stormed over to the fake Suimei with rage burning in his eyes. “Spare us your nonsense! Kaori, Shinonome, and *you*, cat...how can you all buy his lies so easily?”

“Well, I...I mean...what other explanation is there?” I whimpered, and the other two nodded along with me. But Suimei wasn’t convinced.

“There’s no such thing as parallel worlds! This is why I can’t stand people who surrender...” Glaring at his other self, he reached into his pouch and pulled out a paper talisman, which he thrust out menacingly. “Reveal your true form right this minute...or die.”

Instantly, the air between us froze over.

“Why do you assume that I’m an impostor? Can you explain that, at least?” asked the fake Suimei in a calm tone, though he was visibly sweating bullets.

The real (?) Suimei hesitated, his eyes wavering a tiny bit. Then, after a moment of contemplation, he summoned his resolve and said: “Your...height...”

“What about it?”

“How are we the exact same height if there’s a seven-year age gap?!”

The entire room fell silent as the other Suimei’s face flushed bright red, all the way to his ears. That was a good point, actually! I’d completely overlooked it.

Nice try, pal... You almost had me!

“He’s right! You really *are* an impostor, aren’t you?! With the amount of milk Suimei drinks every day, there’s no way you’d still... Bbphh!”

“Shut it, Kaori! Quit blabbing!”

With Suimei’s hand clamped over my mouth, I was starting to feel lightheaded from oxygen deprivation. *Oh, please! You think we haven’t all seen you chugging those little milk cartons like your life depends on it?! I flailed, trying to escape his grasp.*

But just then, I noticed something. The fake Suimei was hanging his head in defeat, his eyebrows drooping sadly. *What’s wrong with him?*

“Hey, you. If you’ve got anything to say, now’s the time,” Shinonome-san called out encouragingly. With a small sigh, the impostor looked straight at his other self, who was currently fighting hard to keep me muzzled.

“It didn’t work.” This admission seemed to ignite something inside of him, and he roared: “I drank all that milk every day and it didn’t do a DAMN THING! Are you happy now that I’ve humiliated myself, you JERKS?!”

“What?!” Naturally, this shocking revelation hit our own Suimei the hardest.

“No... It can't be...”

Stunned, he fell to his knees. After all the hard work I'd seen him put in, this felt like an especially cruel punchline... I stared aghast at the other Suimei.

Just then, a cheerful voice called out: “Hey, I'm barging in real quick! There was a sale on choice beef cuts, so I bought us some! Let's have sukiyaki for... Uh, hello?”

It was Noname the apothecary. She bustled into the bookstore, her cheeks pink with glee, before taking one look at us and stopping in her tracks.

“...What, don't you guys like beef?”

“Quite the opposite, actually!” I reassured her emphatically.

She puffed her cheeks out in a cute little pout. “Then why don't you look happy? I thought you'd be *excited*, you silly girl!”

“Well, I was trying to figure out how to explain the situation we've got on our hands.”

“What situation?”

“See for yourself! There are two Suimeis!”

Noname looked around the room, but she still seemed confused. “Is this a bad joke? Obviously, there's only one of him.”

“What...?”

What's going on? I looked around for the fake Suimei, the one who may or may not have come from a parallel world...but he was nowhere to be seen, almost as if he'd vanished in a puff of smoke.

A few days after the Suimei incident, things were changing for us.

“I wonder what the real story was... I mean, it just doesn't make sense for you to be older than me,” I muttered as I was relaxing after a hot bath.

Suimei scowled at me. “I thought we agreed to forget it ever happened. It was all just a daydream or something.”

“I caaan’t...!” How could we all have the same daydream at the same time? If anything, that was even less likely than the parallel world theory!

Well...I guess it doesn’t matter now. With a shrug, I got up, walked to the sink, and looked at myself in the mirror. Then I grabbed my brand-new bottle of skin cream and spread a thin layer over every inch of my skin. This wasn’t the drugstore brand; no, it was the real top-shelf stuff, and its absorbency was worth every penny. I could feel the moisture returning to my skin!

“Well, look who’s finally hit puberty,” Nyaa-san snarked in passing, shooting me a knowing look. I glared back at her, and she turned and walked away with a scoff.

I pumped a big dollop of serum into my palm and smeared it all over my face in frustration. This wasn’t about *puberty*! She didn’t understand at all!

“I can’t afford to get sunspots at age twenty-two. I have to do something!”

The memory of the impostor’s words sent a shiver down my spine. Sure, maybe it was just an alternate universe thing, but I couldn’t guarantee it wouldn’t happen in this one too!

“Wait, what the...?” I could see Suimei sneaking up the stairs in his pajamas. “Are you going to bed, Suimei?”

“Yeah.”

But it’s only 10 p.m.... Isn’t it kind of early...? Then an epiphany struck, and I wisely chose not to pry further. After all, we’d gotten a magazine the other day with an article about how a healthy sleep routine could improve growth hormone levels... “Sleep well, Suimei! I hope you get taller!”

I shot him a thumbs-up, but he glared back at me. “Get bent.”

I’ll buy him some sardines for extra calcium tomorrow, I thought to myself as I looked out through the window. As usual, the sky in the spirit realm was a swirl of strange colors.

“Eh, I guess these things just happen sometimes.”

Despite all the bizarre happenings, this was still my home. And so, I took a dab of body milk, lathered it up in my palms, and carried on with my skincare

routine...

Author's Note: This is a short story I wrote to celebrate the release day for Volume 1. It's a reference to the original draft I posted online, in which Suimei and Kaori were given different ages. In the print version, Suimei does eventually grow taller, so that's a relief...

Short Story:

Suimei in the Spirit Realm

THE SPIRIT REALM: a land just for spirits, different in every way from the human world. Here there was no sun, and the only light to shine in the encroaching darkness was not electricity but the glow of so-called “glimmerflies.” You could find butterfly hunters selling them out of bamboo baskets on the streets.

To the spirits, glimmerflies were a necessity. Over time, these creatures would crumble to dust, and their light was the only guide in a world otherwise painted in shadow.

Shortly after I first wandered my way into the spirit realm, I would think of an endless parade of haunted houses whenever I saw the one-eyed, the horned, the giant, the red-skinned, or the floating heads pass by in front of the row houses. To me, Shirai Suimei, this was a world of the unknown...and today was a new dawn.

“Ha ha ha ha! Somebody flipped your pillow in the middle of the night? For real? Well, no wonder you’re sleep-deprived!”

“G-Ginme... Don’t laugh at him... Pffff ha ha ha ha ha! My sides!”

“You’re no better than he is, Kinme,” I retorted.

“But it’s so funny!” they shouted back in unison.

I sighed. Why was the spirit realm bookstore’s living room always ground zero for some kind of ruckus?

Kinme and Ginme were Raven Tengu twins. The former had droopy eyes with gold irises, and the latter had upturned eyes with silver irises. They wore matching red and blue suzukake vestments and each carried a ceremonial staff; at a glance, one might assume they were monks. One minute they were laughing their heads off, and the next, they flanked me on either side and slung an arm around my shoulders.

“You human world types are so spoiled. Imagine losing sleep just because you got your pillow flipped.”

“Right? I bet he’d start crying if he saw a rokurokubi peeking into his second-floor window with its super-long neck!”

Not only were their eyes twinkling mischievously at me, but they were both two heads taller than I was, allowing them to practically breathe down my neck. I wrested myself free of their grasp and enforced my boundaries hard. “Knock it off. I’m an exorcist, so it takes a lot more than physical appearance to scare me.”

Instantly, the twins froze, their eyes as wide as saucers. They shot a glance at each other...and started grinning from ear to ear.

“Bro, that’s badass! ‘I’m an exorcist...’ That rules so much!”

“I think my heart skipped a beat. You’re like an action movie star!”

Together they began to cackle, their faces flushed. “You really are the best, Suimei! I’m so glad we’re friends!”

“For the record, I have zero recollection of ever making friends with you two.”

To combat my growing headache, I rubbed my temples. My words seemed to fall on deaf ears. *For crying out loud, it’s like they think I’m their new toy...* They would mess with me every chance they got, and I had more or less resigned myself to my fate by this point. But right as I heaved yet another sigh, a sharp voice cut in.

“That’s enough, both of you! Quit teasing Suimei!”

It was Kaori, who had stopped in the middle of making breakfast to give them both a dirty look. She was one of the few humans who lived in the spirit realm, and though I didn’t know the full story, it seemed she had grown up here from an early age. She narrowed her big brown eyes at the twins and pointed a finger in their faces.

“You two skipped your training again, didn’t you? If you keep misbehaving, I’m going to tell your master.”

Instantly, their smiles vanished. They seemed to take this “master” of theirs

pretty seriously.

“I-I’m sorry, Suimei... I’ll try not to tease you too much.”

“Sorry, pal. You’re just so fascinating, it makes me curious and stuff!”

“You’re not sorry at all, are you, Kinme?”

“Ha ha ha! Busted!”

Kinme stuck his tongue out, and I glared at him. I couldn’t begin to understand the way their Tengu minds worked. Was this what all spirits were like, or were these two just weird? Either way, I never knew what they’d do next, and it drove me crazy.

No...it’s not just them. I shot a glance at the unshaven, lazily dressed man smoking a pipe and squinting at the newspaper.

“Shinonome-san, I told you to stop smoking at mealtime! It stinks!”

“...Oh yeah...”

The owner of the bookstore brushed off Kaori’s anger with a sleepy murmur. His rugged face would likely be considered handsome if it weren’t ruined by the dark circles under his eyes from night after night of writing without sleep. Yes, though he was a spirit, he fancied himself a *writer*. This shocked me at first, as did the revelation that he was Kaori’s foster father.

“Hey, Shinonome-san! Are you even listening?!” She walked right up to him and snatched the newspaper out of his hands. “If you keep this up, you’re going without any booze tonight!”

“Wha... Keep *what* up?! Oh...” Blinking his sleepy eyes, he quickly pressed his palms together in a remorseful apology. “Okay, I messed up! I’m not fully awake yet! Please don’t take my booze away!”

Just then, a flurry of footsteps exploded onto the scene. The living room door flew open, and in walked a fashionista followed by a black cat.

“Ugh, sorry I’m late! Is there any breakfast left for me?”

“I’m home, Kaori. Open me a can of food...the good stuff. You know the one.”

“Welcome, Noname! Breakfast isn’t ready yet. And welcome home, Nyaa-san.

Sorry, we're out of your usual cans. All we have is that free sample I got the other day."

"*Free sample?* Unbelievable. The hell are you trying to make me eat, Kaori?!"

"But it's even more expensive than your usual kind!"

"...Fine, I'll at least *try* it. You're welcome."

Noname was Kaori's mother figure, and Nyaa the cat was her best friend. They both fit right into the atmosphere of the living room. Plus, Noname helped make the cooking go faster. In a blink, the dining table was covered in delicious dishes, and we all dug in.

"Hey, could you pass the soy sauce?"

"Anyone want some of this seasoned laver someone gave me?"

Suddenly I was surrounded by a happy mealtime of pleasant chatter and clinking dishes. Everyone was eating with a smile, and the sight of it made me sigh. A human girl with a spirit mother, a spirit father, spirit friends... Almost like they were pretending this was the human world.

As an exorcist, I knew there were many spirits who liked to eat humans. Back in our world, I had battled them countless times. They only saw us as prey, and they were all too eager to drink our blood and feast upon our entrails, wreaking havoc wherever they went. That was why I'd never once questioned that spirits were evil. They were enemies to be defeated, and our differences could never be put aside. And yet...the more time I spent with these ones, the more they seemed like ordinary humans. Now I wasn't really sure *what* they were.

I let out a sigh. My train of thought was trapped in a negative spiral...all because I didn't get enough sleep...

"Oh, I totally forgot! Zashiki-warashi asked me to pass on a request," Noname said suddenly. She pulled a scrap of paper from her pocket and handed it to Kaori with a smile. "I've been so busy lately that I haven't paid her a visit in quite a while now... You haven't gotten your pillow flipped, have you?"

"Pfffff!" Kinme and Ginme burst out laughing and started rolling around on the tatami.

Kaori shot the twins a withered look, then smiled stiffly at Noname. “Suimei was the latest victim.”

“Oh nooo! Ugh, what rotten luck. Guess he’s been officially initiated,” she mused.

“...What are you talking about?” I asked, confused.

“One of our regulars is a *zashiki-warashi* who lives in the suburbs,” Shinonome explained through a mouthful of egg. “Obnoxious little punk.”

“Shinonome-san, don’t trash-talk our customer!”

“I’m just stating facts...is that such a crime? Whenever she wants to borrow a book, she sneaks into our house at night and flips our pillows. Makes no damn sense.”

“Pillows...?” The word caught my attention, and I narrowed my eyes.

“Have you heard of the spirit known as a *makuragaeshi*?” he asked, popping a sardine into his mouth and crunching it loudly.

A *makuragaeshi* was a spirit that would grab people’s pillows while they were sleeping and either flip them or fling them to the other side of the room. Their appearance varied from region to region; some places believed it took the form of a child, while others described it as a human ghost, often a beautiful woman.

In this case, Shinonome was apparently referring to the former. In the Tohoku region, this pillow-flipping phenomenon was said to be a prank by a *zashiki-warashi*, and a lucky omen as well. Now I knew who had been keeping me up for the past few nights.

“They can break into the store while we’re all asleep?! The security here *sucks...*”

I was terrified by the mental image of a little child standing over my unconscious body. To an exorcist, the spirit realm was enemy territory, so every night I did my best not to sleep too deeply. And yet...

“I can’t believe I didn’t even sense it,” I muttered dubiously.

Shinonome snorted. “This is a *zashiki-warashi* we’re talking about. They’re damn near impossible to spot. Nothing you or I can do about it.”

“There’s honestly *nothing* we can do? I can’t even begin to wrap my head around it.”

“Someone who’s spent a lot of time in the human world wouldn’t understand. Each spirit has a highly specialized skill set. A tanuki deals in bewitchment, a noppera-bo scares humans out walking at night, and a zashiki-warashi sneaks into houses and pulls pranks on the people inside. There’s no easy way to defend against these things.”

“...What, so every spirit is guaranteed to behave the exact same way, regardless of personality or free will?”

“Beats me, kid. I think of myself as something of a scholar when it comes to spirits, but I haven’t conducted any real research. It’s hard to explain in words... Well, you’ll understand soon enough, whether you like it or not.” His blue-gray eyes twinkled in amusement. “Oh, I know! Kaori, you should take him with you to see Zashiki-warashi. He can carry the book, at least.”

“Ooh, good idea. I’m sure he’s bored of sitting around here anyway.”

Suddenly the conversation was moving along without me. “Wait a minute! I keep telling you, I’m looking for a certain spirit...”

“I know, I know! But maybe we’ll find some kind of clue!”

“Exactly. You never know what could turn out to be a lead. Besides, you could use the experience!”

I was fairly sure they weren’t related by blood, and yet they wore identical smirks.

“Good grief... Is it my unlucky day or what...?”

With a heavy sigh, I reluctantly agreed to tag along.

The moment we stepped out of the bookstore, glowing butterflies flocked to us from every direction. These glimmerflies were famously fond of humans, so Kaori and I could make the streets as bright as midday if we walked side by side.

“Stay close to me, okay, Suimei?”

“I *know*.” I gave her a surly look. She was practically treating me like a child.

“Look, I’m just making sure,” she shot back, exasperated.

There was a reason Kaori was somewhat overprotective of me. Like I said, this world was home to plenty of spirits who would gladly have humans for every meal. There was no telling when a hungry monster might descend upon us. And by “us,” I mean *me*.

You see, although she and I were both human, Kaori was known as the bookstore owner’s daughter, and therefore she was off-limits. Since I had lost nearly all my power as an exorcist, I had no choice but to follow behind her like a duckling. It was nothing short of humiliating, but if I wanted to find *him*, then I had no choice.

That being said...

“Why did *you two* come with us? You of all people!” I didn’t enjoy being shadowed by the Tengu twins.

“Wa ha ha! Well, if we went back to our master, we’d just get yelled at anyway.”

“Exactly. So we might as well have lots of fun to balance it out first, see?”

“And fun tends to follow you wherever you go!” they chorused, innocent smiles on their faces.

I scowled. “I’m not some kind of troublemaker. Don’t talk about me like that.”

“Oh, really?” Just then, a three-tailed black cat with heterochromatic eyes drew close. Nyaa, the Kasha spirit, swished her tails meaningfully. “Have you heard? The trees in the mountains have been producing an unusual amount of bad fruit this year. I’m told the spirits who live there are having to come into town to look for food.”

This seemed to come out of nowhere, so I gave her a weird look. “What? They’re not wild animals. What does any of that have to do with...?”

But at that exact moment, a shiver ran down my spine. The faint starlight dimmed, and a long strand of thick, sticky fluid descended to the ground in front of me.

“Hey, cat?”

“Yeeees?”

“Is something...right behind me?” I asked hesitantly.

A wicked smile spread across her face as her eyes twinkled. “Why, yes! A hungry, hungry monster.”

“...Hup!”

I did a quick forward roll to escape to a safer distance. I looked back...and felt goosebumps shoot across every inch of my body.

“Hu...*human*...!”

Standing there was a gigantic creature large enough to fill the entire street. Its skin was inky black, its eyes were bloodshot, and its massive mouth was filled with jagged yellow teeth. It was crawling on all fours like an infant, wearing what could only be described as rags.

“Oof. Get a load of that, Ginme! It’s an obozu!”

“Man, it’s huge, Kinme! Aren’t they kinda dangerous?”

“Just as I thought...it’s so hungry, it’s lost all sense of judgment!” the cat shouted, shielding Kaori with her tiger-sized form. “I’m not sure it knows who it’s attacking. Kaori, hop on! And since there’s no other choice...Suimei, you too! We’re getting out of here!”

“Human... Let me eat the humaaaaan!”

In a flash, the obozu reached out. I dodged instinctively, and a split second later... *BAM!* Its hand smashed into the ground where I’d been standing, kicking up a cloud of dust. The cat clicked her tongue as Kaori and I clambered onto her.

“Rrrrgh! This is why I hate the spring season. Every slack-jawed idiot comes crawling out of the woodwork!”

“Reminds me of that time I got attacked last year,” Kaori chuckled.

“This is no laughing matter!” I snapped at her.

“Hee hee hee hee! It’s just a normal part of life here. Happens to everybody!”

she said with a sheepish shrug.

“I refuse to let you write it off like that, you idiot!”

“Good thing everybody I know is so nice. Lots of spirits stop caring about the finer details once they get hungry enough... But I mean, can we really blame them?”

“Are you *trying* to get eaten?! You’ll die!”

“Relax! There’s nothing to worry about. After all, I’ve got the best group of friends a girl could ask for!”

The obozu’s giant hand reached out a second time...

“GRAAAAAAAHHH!”

A scream echoed in the darkness. Startled, I looked over my shoulder...and saw the Tengu twins blocking the monster’s path.

“Heh heh heh! Called it. The smell of humans always lures in some idiot this time of year. Right, Kinme?”

“An astute observation, Ginme. I expected no less of my other half. But y’know, I’ve been bored to death lately... I think we could use a sparring partner!”

With wicked, toothy grins, the two beckoned defiantly to the obozu. “Let’s plaaay!” they called out in unison, as innocent as children. With a loud *BAM*, another dust cloud rose, followed by the sounds of battle—a fierce one, at that.

“Is it safe to let the twins handle it on their own?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s fine. They’re Raven Tengu, remember? They’ll toy with it for a bit, then hand it over to Shinonome when they’re done.”

“...What for?” I frowned dubiously.

The cat snickered at that. “Use your brain for a second. If someone attacked *your* daughter, would *you* let them walk away without a scratch? Poor thing. Who knows if it’ll make it back to the mountains in one piece.”

“Yeesh...”

Evidently Shinonome was very protective of his little girl. I’d seen glimpses of

it in our conversations here and there, but Nyaa made him sound like a vicious papa bear.

“I hope he doesn’t go too far,” Kaori sighed, looking conflicted.

In contrast, the cat was entirely unruffled. “Oh, it’s nothing for you to worry about. There’s no legal system in the spirit realm, so we all take responsibility for our own actions. Our justice is the karmic variety.”

“Right...” But Kaori didn’t look entirely convinced.

To be fair, *any* normal human would have qualms about the death penalty, but the way she was acting brought a question to mind. “Don’t you ever regret choosing to live in this world?”

One wrong move and she could have been devoured. This was a lawless realm filled with nothing but scary monsters; it was no comfortable place for a human. We belonged in our own world.

And yet, inexplicably, Kaori’s smile never wavered.

“Well...” Her gaze flitted back and forth, and then she laughed. “I mean, this is where I grew up. All my happiest memories, all my favorite things...they’re all right here. So how could I regret it?”

The contentment on her face made my heart skip a beat. *She’s so weird.* “Okay, then,” I replied brusquely, and turned to face forward.

And as I watched the scenery fly past in a blur, I thought to myself:

I really can’t begin to understand this place...but maybe my opinion will change as I learn more.

The black cat brought us to a mansion on the outskirts of town. It was a well-crafted single-story wooden building, with a long path leading from the gates to the front door. The lawn was peppered with carefully manicured pine trees and a koi pond. Judging by how much money was clearly being spent on it, this had to be a wealthy household.

“This is her home...?”

A zashiki-warashi was said to be a guardian deity of a human home, offering prosperity with its presence or causing misfortune with its departure. But if its entire purpose was to coexist with humans, why would it live in the spirit realm? The only humans here were Kaori and me. It didn't add up.

"Pardon the intrusion!" Kaori opened the front door and walked in without even knocking.

"Hey, w-wait! Is it safe to just waltz right in?!" I asked, aghast.

She nodded. "It's fine. Zashiki-warashi lives alone."

"...She does...?" Wasn't this spirit supposed to bring prosperity to a family? Something felt off, but I followed Kaori inside anyway.

The house was silent and spotless, with no trace of life. It felt like a museum that had been built inside a single-family home. As I was admiring the retro vibe of the furnishings, we arrived at our destination.

"Knock, knock!"

She slid open the paper door...and what I saw inside made me stop dead in my tracks.

The room was dimly lit, with old, yellowed shide paper hanging from the ceiling like birthday streamers. All the windows had been papered over with talismans, and the dusty tatami was littered with dolls, balls, and other toys.

"Zashiki-warashi, I brought your book!" Kaori called out once more...and a moment later, one of the Japanese dolls in the corner of the room came to life.

"Aaagh!" I yelped in surprise as it charged forward, eyes sparkling. Evidently the zashiki-warashi had been hiding among the dolls.

"Kaori-oneechan! I was waited for you!"

This spirit looked like a young girl about five years old with a bob haircut and rosy-red cheeks, dressed in a pongee silk kimono with an adorable goldfish pattern. She made a beeline to Kaori and gave her a big hug.

"Did you bring me the book I wanted?"

"Yes, of course!"

“Yaaaay! Gimme, gimme! I been wanting it so bad!” Zashiki-warashi hopped impatiently from one foot to the other as Kaori handed it over. Squealing, she marveled at the cover.

“...I’m gonna take a nap,” the black cat said through a yawn as she padded over to the corner of the room.

I figured I should probably avoid bothering them myself, so I started idly looking around...that is, until I spotted a little altar with a double-door cabinet. Something about it struck me as strange, so I moved in closer.

For an altar, it was oddly small and plain, suggesting it wasn’t very expensive. That definitely clashed with the otherwise luxurious mansion. I glanced around the room. If this was the type of family altar room which was often found in large houses, then surely someone would have decorated it with photos of the deceased...

“...Eeegh...!”

Before I could stop myself, I let out a sound of disgust. There were picture frames sitting on the lintel, but the faces had been blacked out in every one of them. Creepy!

“Hey, Mister, whatcha looking at?”

The sudden voice from behind nearly made me jump out of my skin. Willing my racing heart to settle, I slowly turned around. The zashiki-warashi was looking at me with her large-pupiled eyes.

“Sorry, could you scooting over a bit? I wanna show off my book!”

To who? I wondered. Nevertheless, I did as she’d asked without a word.

The zashiki-warashi sat in front of the altar, her little arms grasping the book, and opened the cabinet doors. Inside was a picture frame and a memorial tablet. With a sweet smile, she pointed the book’s front cover at the tablet. “Hee hee... Remember the book we read together a long time ago? Kaori-oneechan brought it for me.”

The way she spoke to the photo, she seemed no different from any other innocent child. *I guess she’s talking to someone who’s passed away...* This was a

relatively normal thing to do, and I was relieved to see it. At a closer look, the photograph appeared to be of a kindly old woman.

“Does someone special sleep here?” I asked gently.

“Yup, that’s right. I thought she was the most caringest lady in the whole wide world, so I promised I’d keep her happy for the rest of her life.” With a loving smile, Zashiki-warashi recounted the story of her favorite person. “Her name was Tamako. Ever since I becomed a zashiki-warashi, I’ve had lots of ‘landlords’—I can’t even remember them all—but Tamako was the nicest one.”

This zashiki-warashi once lived in the home of a major landowner. Everyone there respected her from a distance, making offerings of toys and treats. They kept her room clean and held a special ritual on certain days. This was the proper way to treat a nonhuman being.

Thus, the zashiki-warashi tried to “do her job.” She never showed herself to the family, and she showed her gratitude for the offerings by offering prosperity in equal measure. As the family became successful, they pampered her more and more, and she was content...

“But guess what?” Giggling, she gazed wistfully into the distance. “One day, Tamako sawed me.”

According to Zashiki-warashi, Tamako was tickled pink. *“Why, I never knew our guardian deity was so precious!”*

“My heart got fluttery, and I felt all warm. I liked when she looked at me with her friendly eyes. So even though I wasn’t supposed to, I goed to see her a whole bunch.”

And each time, Tamako was happy to see her. They’d eat snacks and play games together, and it was the happiest time of the zashiki-warashi’s life.

“Tamako was sick a lot, so we’d read books together whenever she had to stay in bed. She teached me how to read! Isn’t that cool?”

“A zashiki-warashi can learn to read...? That’s unbelievable. You must have really loved her.”

“Yup, she was the first friend I ever haded!” With rosy, blushing cheeks, she

played with her fingers restlessly. “Being with Tamako made me sooo happy, I decided to work super-duper hard so they could make lots of extra money! I think that was why...I could feel the house get fancier and fancier. Lots of people came, and Tamako and the others were all really happy.” She flopped down on the floor, kicking her legs while hugging the book with a big grin. “That was the first time I ever feeled happy to be a zashiki-warashi from the bottom of my heart!”

The way she giggled really did make her look like a normal five-year-old.

“So that’s why you still protect this house?” I asked. Surely nothing made a zashiki-warashi happier than bringing wealth to a household, so the only reason she’d stay in an empty house was because she had a sentimental attachment to it...right?

“Huh?” She looked up at me with those dilated eyes and cocked her head. “Don’t be silly. I don’t protect this house! Because...”

The next moment, all emotion evaporated from her face, leaving a blank slate. Then her lips curled into a twisted grin. Clutching at my clothes with her stubby little hands, she whispered:

“I’m the one who killed this family.”

“Wh-what?!” All the hairs on my body stood on end, and I stumbled backward, landing on my rear.

The zashiki-warashi rose to her feet and stood over me, her expression oddly calm.

“Obviously I wish I could have been a guardian deity forever, but...the richer they got, the more bad guys showed up. When Tamako got too sick to get out of bed, they hid her away in a dark room and wished she would hurry up and die, just so they could get their inheritance. She spent her final days so sad that her family was so miserable. Sure, they throwed her a fancy funeral, but only because they wanted to make themselves looking good. They never came to see her after that.” She shot a glance at the small altar. “Sweet, sweet Tamako. I felt so bad for her, I couldn’t stand it. *So, I killed every last one of them.*”

Her innocent, cheerful smile made me shudder in horror. “How could you...?!”

“How come you’re surprised? / gived them that fortune, and / taked it back. They were mean to my favoritest friend...stole my one and only itty-bitty happiness! They got what they deserved.”

She spoke these chilling words with a grin. Cold sweat trickled down my back as I looked over at the photos on the lintel. All those blacked-out faces... How many dozens of human beings had she killed?

I knew it. You spirits are all monsters!

No matter how innocent or human they looked, they played by their own rules, which let them commit atrocities without batting an eye. Our differences were irreconcilable!

“That’s why I’m not the guardian deity of this house no more. Got it, Mister?” The zashiki-warashi cocked her head at me.

I wasn’t sure how to respond, but then a question came to mind. “Then...what *are* you?” I asked. “Shinonome says spirits are bound by their unique skills, and a zashiki-warashi has the ability to bring fortune to a family of humans. Without that family, what are you left with? You can’t call yourself a real zashiki-warashi anymore!”

“...That’s not true.”

She blinked back at me, then leaned in close, peering into my eyes. Her pupils were pools of darkness distilled, and her skin was unnaturally pale and clear. The stink of funerary incense emanated from every inch of her little body.

“You sure say some dumb stuff, Mister. A zashiki-warashi can only be a zashiki-warashi, even if you peel back the skin and there’s a monstrous face underneath... See?”

Her eyes twinkled, and I was so terrified, I suppressed a scream...

“Knock it off!” Just then, Kaori marched up and grabbed Zashiki-warashi by the scruff of the neck, pulling her away from me. Exasperated, she put her free hand on her hip. “Good grief! How many times have you tried to scare somebody with that?”

“...Huh? Wh-what do you mean?” I spluttered, shoulders heaving. My heart

was still jackhammering in my chest.

The zashiki-warashi giggled in delight. “I can’t help it! Their reactions are always so funny!” she exclaimed, stomping her feet.

“I...I beg your *pardon*...?!”

“Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha! *Heeeee!* My sides...!”

You’re telling me...this little brat was just messing with me?! My face burned as Kaori shook her head wearily at the mischievous spirit. “You should have told me it was just a joke!” I snapped with a frustrated sigh. *Guess she didn’t murder the whole family after all. That’s a relief—*

All of a sudden, a shiver ran down my spine, and I looked up. Zashiki-warashi was looking at me with a smile on her face...but it didn’t reach her polished obsidian eyes.

“Well then!” She grabbed the book off the tatami floor and dusted off her kimono, then eagerly turned back to us. “I’m gonna go home now. I gotta read my book!”

“Okay, no problem. Get in touch if you want to borrow another one...and by that, I mean ask us *in person*! No more pillow-flipping!”

“What? No way! I’m a zashiki-warashi. Pranks are my favoritest!” Snickering, she turned away.

“Hey, wait! ‘Go home’? I thought...” I called out, but my words faltered a split second later.

The spirit’s tiny body zipped into the small altar, which rattled slightly as the cabinet doors slammed shut behind her.

“...Wh...?”

As I sat there on the tatami in a daze, Kaori finally broke the silence.

“She’s still a real zashiki-warashi. She just has a much smaller home to protect now.”

“You mean...?”

“Yup. That family altar is her home, and she lives happily with Tamako-san’s

spirit.”

“She lives in there...? Well, I guess that makes sense. Altars are said to be ‘a home for spirits,’ after all...”

No one in that household had cared for Tamako or the zashiki-warashi. The two of them only ever had each other, but now they had a home of their own...

“Is this your newfound ‘itty-bitty happiness’?” I asked in a small voice. But my question went unanswered, echoing fruitlessly off the walls.

“Oops, that took longer than I thought it would. It’s way past lunchtime!” Kaori exclaimed as we left the zashiki-warashi mansion. “No wonder my tummy’s rumbling... Hey, Suimei, let’s get a bite to eat while we’re out. I’ll pay for it with the money I got from Zashiki-warashi! As long as it’s not too pricey...”

“Fine with me.”

“Yaaaay! You don’t mind, right, Nyaa-san?”

“...Sure, why not? Ugh, I’m still sleepy...” The cat yawned widely as we walked down the street bustling with spirits.

As always, butterflies were drawn to us the moment we stepped outside. In a world of darkness, their yellow light was a giant neon sign alerting everyone to the foreign elements in their midst. But Kaori didn’t seem to care; perhaps she was used to it by then.

“We could go to Tsurube-otoshi’s soba noodle bar. Ooh, or we could get the daily special at Yamanba’s!” As Kaori rambled giddily, I walked next to her with my mind in a fog. Then she peered at my face. “You tired?”

Her eyes glittered mischievously. I averted my gaze. “I guess.” I shrugged. “I woke up sleep-deprived, then got attacked by a monster, and then the zashiki-warashi freaked me out... It’s been one hell of a day.”

“Ha ha ha! True. Did you have fun, though?”

“If you remotely think any of this was *fun*, I question your mental health.”

“Awww, c’mon, that’s harsh! I object, Your Honor!”

“Overruled.”

As she giggled, I let out a small sigh. Above me, the spirit realm’s sky was dotted with stars of all shapes and sizes. Entirely unlike the atmosphere of the human world, this mysterious sky would intricately change its color during each of the four seasons, and beneath it thrived mysterious beings entirely unlike humans.

“This world is such a 180 from everything sane and logical, it makes me want to scream,” I remarked with a self-deprecating smile.

For a fleeting moment, Kaori’s eyes widened in shock...but then that happy-go-lucky smile returned in full force. “Is it really that bad?”

“...Absolutely. Coming here has completely screwed up the way I think about spirits.”

That zashiki-warashi had destroyed the same family it once protected, just to avenge a single member. It was cruel and heartless, yet compassionate and pure. How was I meant to feel about it?

“You go ahead and think real hard about that!” Kaori declared with a patronizing pat on the back. “There are all kinds of spirits, you know. Sweeping generalizations just don’t apply, same as with us humans. But I guess you wouldn’t understand quite yet...”

Spirits were the same as humans? Well...maybe so. Some humans were good, and others were unsalvageable. Still, I couldn’t help but feel annoyed. “Quit acting like some wise old sage, you nitwit. You’re only three years older than me.”

And yet, despite my glare, she beamed brightly. “Like it or not, age is one thing that can’t be changed, so I’ll be treating you like a kid for the rest of your life!”

“Save it until *you* stop acting like one!”

“Nnngh...I’ll try my best!”

“Oh, I wasn’t expecting you to agree with that.” I shrugged my shoulders.

She pouted her lips slightly. “Girls my age have a lot going on, okay? We want

to grow up, but also we kind of don't."

"Well, for my sake, I hope you do. And I hope it happens soon. I'm begging you."

"Heyyyy, that's so rude! You make it sound like I'm nothing but a burden!"

"Because you are!"

There we were in a mysterious otherworld filled with spirits, and yet we were bickering loudly back and forth like it was any other peaceful day. Unbelievable.

"Uh, hello?! I'm starving over here!" the black cat called grumpily.

At this, we exchanged a glance, then took off running down the street, weaving our way through the passersby.

Author's Note: This short story was originally printed in a booklet released to celebrate the first volume of the manga adaptation. To make sure newcomers to the series could enjoy it as a standalone, I wrote it with a painstaking level of detail. Though the zashiki-warashi is one of my favorite spirits, there just wasn't room for her in the main story, so I'm really glad I could fit her into this one instead.

Short Story:

Kuro versus Akamadara

EARLY THAT SUMMER on Mount Kurama, Kuro devoted himself to day after day of hard training alongside Suimei. What led to this decision? A bruised ego.

As an Inugami, Kuro had hunted dozens of spirits. Though he was small enough to be mistaken for a dachshund, his rapid-fire attacks were so potent that every soul in the exorcism business had heard about the Shirai family Inugami. He was proud to have supported their household all on his own.

And yet...once he started living with Suimei in the spirit realm, that same pride was left in tatters.

It was partly because the spirits he faced turned out to be abnormally strong, but even then, his techniques were lacking. In no sense had he performed well. Several times, he had let out loud, pathetic whimpers as the enemy's attack knocked him out. As a result, Nyaa the Kasha spirit called him a mutt...and since he harbored a tiny crush on her, this was something he could not abide. If he couldn't pull off a win every once in a while, it would threaten his masculinity.

"I'm gonna make myself a strong male and prove her wrong about me...!"

The flames of passion burned in his scarlet eyes as he ran around the hills and fields with Suimei every day. His efforts were paying off, his fitness was improving, and he also started to regain his confidence as he continued to defeat spirit after spirit who came to attack Seigen. His training was going so well that he was now convinced he could handle anything that stood in his way.

That said, there was one thing he would never grow to like.

"Great work, Master Kuro! Did you get any blood on you? I'll wipe it off with this towel. You performed like a ferocious demon today! Truly captivating. As a fellow Inugami of the Shirai household, I couldn't be prouder!"

A handsome young man waited on Kuro hand and foot. Red streaks highlighted his black hair, and his eyes were an identical shade of scarlet. He

was wearing an unzipped hoodie over a kimono like some kind of fashion model, and frankly, he had the good looks to fit in at any talent agency. But he, like Kuro, was in fact an Inugami. His name was Akamadara, and he was the shapeshifting familiar of Shirai Seigen.

“Are you hungry, Master? Shall I prepare a barbecue?” he blathered on cheerfully while wiping the blood away, but Kuro continued to ignore him. Though Akamadara had taken to calling him “Master” for some reason, the affection was not mutual.

Strictly speaking, the Inugami had a hierarchy. Some acted on animal instinct with no consciousness of their own; some understood human speech and could fight together with their masters; and finally, some were so powerful that they could take a humanoid form.

Needless to say, Akamadara was the latter, the highest rank. And yet, he showed inexplicable deference to Kuro, an obviously weaker Inugami. He acted as if they really were master and disciple, and Kuro couldn’t stand it.

“I’m not hungry.”

“But you seem tired. Shall I prepare a bed for you?”

“I...I told you, I’m fine!” Kuro retorted brusquely.

“Oh...I see...”

Then Kuro saw the look of devastation on Akamadara’s face, and his ears drooped. *Gah, this is so awkward!* “Nnngh... Th-then again, I might be a little hungry after all,” he stammered, taking back his earlier statement.

Akamadara’s eyes immediately lit up like fireworks. “Really?! I’ll bring you something as soon as I’m done cleaning you off. We’ve got some fine venison today, and I’d love for you to try it, Master...”

Watching the smiling Akamadara carry out his task, Kuro quietly let out a sigh. *How did this happen?*

It had all started after a private conversation between the two of them. Something Kuro said had resonated with Akamadara, who then started to act as his disciple. This was not something Kuro was prepared to deal with.

Worse still, he couldn't blow Akamadara off completely because his master, Seigen, was the father of Kuro's former master and current partner, Suimei. For a few complicated reasons, the relationship between father and son was extremely shaky, and there was no telling how it would develop. It was entirely possible that the two would eventually come to blows. Therefore, the safer choice was to avoid associating too closely with either of them. And yet...

"Now, let's get you sparkling clean! Your fur is truly exquisite, Master."

"...Stop it. Flattery won't get you anywhere."

"This is not mere *flattery*! I'm speaking from the heart!"

It was hard to be mean to someone who seemed so genuinely affectionate. Kuro considered himself a good dog; even Midori, his master before Suimei, had laughed at him for being a little too kindhearted. Because of that, Kuro would always repeat a mantra to himself in situations like these:

I won't be bought, I won't be bought, I won't be bought!

He recited it like an incantation, firmly willing himself never to open his heart. Squeezing his eyes shut, he waited for the moment to pass. But just then, Akamadara seemed to notice something.

"Oh dear, you really must be tired. Your muscles are stiff."

He reached out with a gentle hand and rubbed the other Inugami all over. Instantly, Kuro tensed up like he'd been struck by lightning. *Wh-what the...?!* Akamadara's touch was neither too hard nor too soft...caressing all the right places... His massage felt incredible, and Kuro was at his mercy!

"Hnnnn..." Before he could stop himself, he let out a whine as his body relaxed. The stimulus was making his mind go fuzzy, but he struggled with all his might to maintain control.

Don't give in to his temptation! I'm Suimei's Inugami partner! The entire Shirai household is on my shoulders!

"Oh, does that feel good?" Akamadara asked in the tone of a bully. "I'm glad. After all, I'm a dog too. I know *exactly* what makes us feel good."

With a bright smile, he continued to have his way with Kuro's body. Gasping

for air, Kuro continued to wrestle with himself.

If he's this good at giving massages, maybe it's worth it to be friends with him... No, no, no! Don't be an idiot! Tears sprang to Kuro's eyes as he recited his vow: *I...I WON'T BE BOUGHT!*

Alas, his body was willing, and his spirit was weak.

"Awoooooo...!!!" Instead of trying to escape, Kuro flopped down on his side.

"Awww, you're wagging your tail so hard! I'm honored!" Akamadara exclaimed gleefully as he continued his massage.

And so, the battle of Kuro versus Akamadara waged on...

Author's Note: I love this pairing way too much! I wrote this short story when Volume 5 was released. Akamadara knows he's stronger than Kuro, of course, but that's all the more reason to call him Master. I just love obnoxiously difficult characters!

Afterword

HELLO, EVERYONE. Shinobumaru here. Thank you for reading Volume 7 of *The Haunted Bookstore*! What did you think? This was my first time writing a short story collection, and I really struggled my way through it, but by the end, I felt as though I'd given everyone a true epilogue.

Truth be told, I was thinking of writing some what-if stories or perhaps revisiting details that weren't fully explored in the main story. But nearly everything I wanted to cover had been written already, so I ultimately went with "what happened next" stories instead. Even if it wasn't quite what you were expecting, I hope you still enjoyed it.

I think my personal favorite was the story about Kaori's children. They approach the bookstore with a slightly different stance from their mother... I'm sure it causes all sorts of problems, but I enjoy the chemical reaction that comes from putting these kids from the spirit realm into the human world. If I get the opportunity, I'd love to write a story centered on Yorutsuki, the eldest. (May as well shoot my shot, right? LOL.)

I couldn't have published this series without the support of so many people: my editor Sato-san, cover illustrator Munashichi-sensei, the marketing team, the designers, the proofreaders, and all the bookstore employees... These books passed through so many hands to reach their dear readers, and I'm deeply grateful.

From the moment I typed out the very first sentence of the story online, I never dreamed it would see this much success. It begins with the boy-meets-girl cliché: She lives in a beautiful, bewitching otherworld, and he stumbles headfirst into what he sees as enemy territory. It brings me so much joy to know that I've guided them to the end of their tale, and I hope someday I can write another story that will reach an audience as large as this one. Thank you so very much for joining me all the way to the final volume!

Lastly, though this concludes the *Haunted Bookstore* series, your dear Shinobumaru intends to continue writing many more stories from here on.

My new series *Koukyuu no Kinsho Jijou* (lit. “The Forbidden Literature of the Inner Palace”) will be published by Kotonoha Bunko. This one is set in a Chinese-style world where spirits cause problems that can only be solved with stories. That’s right, I’m delving into Chinese spirits next! Trying to read classical Chinese is a struggle, but I’m giving it my very best effort. I hope you’ll look forward to it!

In the spring heralded
by a gentle breeze,

Shinobumaru



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter

Table of Contents

- [Table of Contents](#)
- [Copyrights and Credits](#)
- [Title Page](#)
- [Table of Contents Page](#)
- [Chapter 1: Dawn of Spring](#)
- [Chapter 2: The Swallows’ Nest](#)
- [Chapter 3: Gentlemen’s Late Summer](#)
- [Chapter 4: Father and Son](#)
- [Chapter 5: Old Enough](#)
- [Side Story: Two-Sided Smile](#)
- [Chapter 6: The Final Day](#)
- [Extra: Short Story Collection](#)
- [Short Story: The Second Suimei](#)
- [Short Story: Suimei in the Spirit Realm](#)
- [Short Story: Kuro versus Akamadara](#)
- [Afterword](#)
- [Newsletter](#)