The Contract Between a Specter and a Servant

Michiru Fushino



4

The Contract Between a Specter and a Servant

4

Michiru Fushino

Illustration by Aki Aoi

Yen On
New York

Copyright



MICHIRU FUSHINO

Translation by Eriko Sugita
Cover art by Aki Aoi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

YOMA TO GEBOKU NO KEIYAKU JOKEN Vol.4
©Michiru Fushino 2004, 2022
First published in Japan in 2022 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com facebook.com/yenpress twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Fushino, Michiru, author. | Aoi, Aki, illustrator. | Sugita, Eriko, translator.
Title: The contract between a specter and a servant / Michiru Fushino ; illustration by Aki Aoi ; translation by Eriko Sugita.
Other titles: Yoma to geboku no keiyaku joken. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2024-Identifiers: LCCN 2023049666 | ISBN 9781975392000 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975392574 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975392598 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Deals—Fiction. | LCGFT: Fantasy fiction. | Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.F978 Co 2024 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023049666

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9868-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-9869-9 (ebook)



CONTENTS

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1 Someone Important to Me

Chapter 2 Another Journey

Chapter 3 Reminiscence and the Now

Chapter 4 The Land of Cause and Effect

Chapter 5 An Entangled Past

Epilogue

Yen Newsletter

Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1 Someone Important to Me

Chapter 2 Another Journey

Chapter 3 Reminiscence and the Now

Chapter 4 The Land of Cause and Effect

Chapter 5 An Entangled Past

Epilogue

The Contract Between a Specter and a Servant

CHARACTERS

Masamichi Adachi

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

Shino Tatsumi

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

Bougyoudou

The antique store that Shino operates.
Spirits reside within its wares.

PROLOGUE

"Oh!"

After exiting his prep school and walking a few steps, Masamichi Adachi came to a stop and let out a small cry of surprise.

He turned around as his gaze tracked the movement of a single dragonfly.

"A dragonfly!"

Cleverly hovering in the air and instantly changing its altitude, the bright red dragonfly flew over the heads of the pedestrians and took off in the blink of an eye.

"It's still awfully hot, but I guess it's already autumn from a dragonfly's point of view," Masamichi muttered, and he resumed walking.

It was now September, and recently, he had been feeling like the sun was setting earlier.

It was after five in the evening, and the orange sunset was so large and dazzling that it hurt his eyes.

Clouds filled the sky, but the morning and evening breezes were becoming a bit chilly.

It's autumn…already autumn. Next year will be here before I know it, and it will be time for another try at my college entrance exam.

The upcoming autumn was the second one since he had left home and failed in his first attempt to get into college—just thinking about it made him sigh.

Thanks to the generosity of his roommate and "master," Shino Tatsumi, Masamichi was attending prep school and studying to take

his entrance exam for the third time.

However, his initial reason for applying to the agriculture department had been "*to help my parents and grandparents, who were farmers, even if only indirectly*." The moment he found out they had closed their farm business and abandoned their fields, his driving force had become uncertain.

Shino says that education will never be a waste of time and that I can change my path when I find something that I really want to do. But still.

Masamichi sighed once more as he walked briskly along with the crowd.

What do I want to do? Not for someone else, but for myself.

He had wanted to live a life that would be useful to the people he cared about.

He didn't want to think those feelings had been *wrong*, and he didn't think that was the case now.

Still, he had neglected himself too much in the past and hadn't considered how he felt, telling himself that what he did was for the good of others.

Since Shino had pointed that out to him, Masamichi had wanted to rectify his unbalanced take on life somehow, but it wasn't possible to do that overnight or suddenly discover his life's *purpose*.

Life would be easy if Masamichi could easily correct his reclusive and passive personality.

He staggered wearily down the sidewalk, and as he glanced at the stores that lined the street, he suddenly remembered what Shino had said that morning.

Oops. He told me to pick up tofu!

Shino was a specter, but he was also a great cook. He didn't seem to mind going shopping for ingredients and appeared to be a regular at many specialty stores as well as at the supermarket.

A few of them were on Masamichi's way home from prep school, so Shino sometimes told him to pick up a thing or two.

Six months had already passed since Masamichi met Shino when he was waiting for death after being hit by a car. In exchange for his life, he had become the specter's servant.

While some of his jobs with Shino had been quite gruesome, such as helping to expel spirits, most of his master's *orders* were surprisingly domestic—shopping, cleaning up, and minding the store.

An errand boy for a specter…gee, that has a cute ring to it.

Once that occurred to him, Masamichi found it irresistibly funny, and his glum expression finally brightened up a little.

He didn't tell me what he was planning for dinner tonight, just said that I'd know when I ate it, but I wonder what we're having. Maybe yudofu, *soft tofu simmered in water with kelp. No, it isn't the season for something that warm yet. Whatever it is, I hope it won't be too hot.*

As he mulled over the possibilities, he arrived at the tofu store.

The small, old-fashioned store was reminiscent of the Showa era. It had a large, deep, stainless-steel tank filled with water, where ivory-colored tofu floated. Next to the tank was a table with plastic bags of *okara* bean curd, deep-fried tofu, and tofu with vegetables mixed in. There wasn't much left, since it was late in the afternoon, after most people had done their shopping.

"Welcome! What can I get you, young scholar?"

Masamichi flinched when he was automatically pegged as a student, but he realized that the prep school envelope sticking out of his backpack had given it away.

"Oh, um, two pieces of the soft tofu, please."

"Sure thing!"

The store owner looked to be in his late forties or early fifties and had a stocky build and a round face that reminded Masamichi of potatoes. The man responded swiftly and went over to the tank containing the tofu.

His large hands scooped up the tofu surprisingly gently, and then he looked up and smiled at Masamichi.

"You're in luck, buddy. These are the last two."

"They are? Lucky me."

The store owner took a closer look at Masamichi's happy face as he transferred the tofu into a plastic container.

"I thought I'd seen your face somewhere before. You're the boy living with Tatsumi."

Masamichi got nervous at the mention of Shino's name and straightened his back a little.

"Oh, yes, that's right."

"You came here with him a while ago, right? It's funny that with his movie star good looks, he comes here and buys okara bean curd. Not that that's an issue, since our okara is delicious."

"The home-style *unohana* he makes with okara, vegetables, shiitake mushrooms, and *hijiki* seaweed is very tasty."

"Wow. He makes such an old-fashioned dish with a face like that, huh?"

He's more than just old-fashioned, Masamichi thought. *He's a specter that's been living for more than a thousand years.* Of course, he swallowed the words and said neutrally, "Yessir."

"What was your name again? Ser…vant? That's a strange name. What kind of kanji characters do you spell that with?"

A peculiar breath escaped Masamichi's lips.

Oh, God, Shino…!

Masamichi immediately recalled coming to this store with Shino the other day for the first time. This friendly store owner had asked Shino if he had brought along his younger brother, and he'd said right away, *"He isn't my brother. He's a servant."*

Shino routinely introduced him to customers at his antique store, Bougyoudou, as his assistant, so perhaps behind his usual poker face he had actually been a little shaken up by the man suddenly asking if Masamichi was his younger brother.

The store owner had looked totally bewildered at the time but brushed it off with a casual smile, and Masamichi recalled simply smiling back at him and letting sleeping dogs lie.

That's a professional store owner for you. He remembered our exchange…

Although he was surprised and confused, Masamichi couldn't exactly explain that he really was Shino's *servant*. So he did his best to stay calm as he said, "No, um, my name is Adachi."

"Huh? Wasn't it *Servant*?"

"No, sir, it's Adachi," he repeated, feeling nervous.

Without pursuing the matter further, the man smiled and said, "Adachi. Okay, I got it."

Relieved, Masamichi watched as the man carefully placed the second square of soft tofu into the container.

The tofu pieces had a glossy surface, with crisp-looking cuts going through them, and looked wonderfully fresh.

"I only ever bought tofu at the supermarket, but when I tried your tofu, it was totally different. It's hard to describe, but it's delicious."

"Delicious is the best compliment. Other words are too extravagant to say to a tofu maker. Food like tofu that you eat every day can't be *too* good. Oh, did you need anything else today?"

Masamichi thought for a minute, then replied, "I wasn't told to get anything else in particular, but that deep-fried tofu looks great… can I have a piece? Just one?"

"Of course! Thank you for your business."

The store owner covered the tofu container with film and sealed it with heat, then suddenly looked at Masamichi again as he reached for the fried tofu.

"Come to think of it, you don't look as energetic today as you did the other day. Have you been studying too hard?"

"Huh?!" Masamichi was startled. "D-do I look that way?"

"Yeah. I'm not quite sure how to put it—you look kind of…glum. Are you feeling okay? Oh, hey, drink this. It will give you some energy!"

The man then took something out of a refrigerator, poured it into a small paper cup, and offered it to Masamichi.

"Oh…th-thank you."

The liquid was the same milky color as the tofu.

"It's rare that I still have some left. Drink up. You can tell me your problems while you drink if you want."

"…Thank you."

Masamichi gratefully took a sip of the soy milk.

Even cold, it had a strong soy flavor. However, it was refreshing and didn't have an unpleasant aftertaste.

"It's delicious!"

"Yeah, good. And…?"

Masamichi hesitated, then opened up to the man about his concerns, being as concise as he could.

"I'm not sure…I don't know what I want to do with my life."

The store owner didn't make fun of him. Maintaining the same friendly tone he'd been using, he said, "That's normal."

Masamichi's eyes widened in surprise.

"It's normal?"

"Yes. Not many people your age know exactly what they want to do with their lives."

"But…"

"The only people who tell others about their ways of life are the ones who had big dreams and made them come true. Adachi, that's why you think everyone is the same way. You're too serious," the store owner said, and he laughed as he placed the fried tofu into another container that was the perfect size for it. He handled it a bit more carelessly than the fragile tofu.

Masamichi smiled uncertainly and tilted his head.

"Is that how it is? How was it for you…?" he asked shyly.

The store owner blinked a few times and then laughed heartily.

"Me? My family has been running this shop since my grandfather's time, so it was only natural that I follow in their footsteps."

"Wasn't there anything else you wanted to do?"

“Well, I wouldn’t say there wasn’t, but it was like a vague longing. My grandfather, my father, this store, and our tofu were right in front of me, and I didn’t want to lose any of it, and I was running the business before I knew it.”

“So you did it for your father and grandfather?”

The man looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then shook his head.

“Not really. They were both happy, of course. But I was the one who didn’t want our business to close down. Plus, I wanted to keep providing people with great tofu.”

The man’s words touched Masamichi’s heart. He hung his head in self-loathing, and without even realizing it, he was confiding in the man about his situation.

“My grandparents and parents… They were farmers, and I decided to study agriculture so I could help them. Then they suddenly quit.”

The store owner laughed.

“So, you were left out in the cold, huh? Poor thing. But it only means that things became zero.”

“Zero?”

“It’s tough if you’re starting in the negatives, but you can do anything you like if you’re starting at zero. It’s great to be able to forge a new path. I don’t have any other paths available now that I’ve become a total sucker for tofu.”

“Oh…”

The store owner wrapped the soft tofu and fried tofu separately, and seeing Masamichi’s confusion, he added in a cheerful tone, “You don’t know what you want to do? Well, good for you. Feeling down about it is a waste of time. Just try everything you can think of, and sooner or later, you’ll find something. It doesn’t have to be a huge, one-of-a-kind dream. Just find something that you wouldn’t mind doing, and consider yourself lucky.”

“Is that…how it is?”

"Probably. You may be having a tough time right now, but hey, don't you feel a sort of anticipation when you walk around an unfamiliar city? It's like that. Things won't change whether you're excited or feeling glum, so you might as well enjoy the thrill of anticipation."

"…!"

The unexpected encouragement left Masamichi at a loss for words. The store owner handed him his bag of items and grinned.

"Think, young scholar, think all you want. That's your privilege as a young man. Now, you'd better go on, huh? Tatsumi must be waiting for you. Give him my regards. Tell him I'll start making the egg tofu again. As soon as the weather starts to cool down. Bougyoudou's previous owner and his wife loved it."

"Th-thank you… I'll definitely pass along your message. And thanks for the soy milk, too. It was delicious."

After politely expressing his gratitude and leaving the store, Masamichi continued his walk, feeling somewhat dazed, as if a fox spirit had bewitched him.

Things won't change whether you're excited or feeling glum, huh…?

Masamichi hated his lack of initiative, but there was no point in panicking when he knew he couldn't fix that overnight.

Masamichi felt like the shopkeeper had been trying to tell him to look ahead, if he had the time to be looking down all depressed.

"Try everything I can think of. Enjoy the excitement of anticipation." Repeating the store owner's wise words, Masamichi felt strength welling up within and nodded firmly. A small smile appeared on his face.

Masamichi hurried home as dusk approached, half-eager and half-anxious to hear what Shino would say when he saw the deep-fried tofu he hadn't asked for…

CHAPTER 1

Someone Important to Me

Waking up to the smell of coffee reminded Masamichi Adachi of a romantic drama he'd seen during his childhood.

Feeling a bit excited, he lay in bed, inhaled, and filled his lungs with the fragrant aroma.

The old antique store, which also served as a home for him and his master, Shino Tatsumi, was airy at best, somewhat poorly built at worst, and many of its facilities were old and outdated.

The ventilation fans were one such example.

When someone cooked in the kitchen, which was connected to the tea room on the first floor, some of the air sucked in by the ventilation fan was released into the second-floor hallway.

It reached the room where Masamichi slept, and that morning, it even served as an alarm clock.

Shino's making coffee this morning. It's a nice change, since we usually have Japanese food for breakfast.

Pondering the change of pace, Masamichi got out of bed.

His lower back ached because the mattress was a little worn-out.

It was no wonder. Yoriko, the previous owner's wife, had used the bed for many years.

Replacing a bed was a big deal, and he'd considered getting a mattress topper instead, but he had been a bit lazy and kept putting it off.

He quickly got changed and went down the steep stairs to find Shino sitting at the table in the tea room, drinking coffee, with a newspaper spread out before him.

When he's sitting there like that, he looks like an ordinary human being—an exceptionally beautiful one, that is, Masamichi thought as he greeted the specter.

Long ago, the people of Kyoto had feared Shino as a man-eating specter. He was defeated in a battle against Tokifuyu Tatsumi, a spiritual medium who had turned him into a *shikigami*, an apparition bound by servitude.

Tokifuyu had then given him the name "Shino" and the body he now had…which Shino called his *temporary vessel*.

The human form that Tokifuyu had made to suit his taste was more of a modern beauty than what would have been appreciated during the Heian period. Tall and slender, Shino looked like he could be a fashion model or an actor.

He had trimmed his formerly long Heian-period hairstyle to conform to current trends and dyed it a slightly lighter shade, making him more stylish.

No one would believe he's a specter who's been living for more than a thousand years.

Masamichi sat facing Shino with such thoughts.

Shino wouldn't look up from his newspaper or greet him, but that was how it was every morning.

Specters didn't have a habit of greeting each other, and, according to Shino, it wasn't necessary to look up from his paper, since he was familiar with Masamichi's movements.

It was indeed rational, but Masamichi felt a little lonely. He wasn't about to complain about everything his master did, though. He had gotten used to it.

"I see you're having coffee this morning. Does that mean…we're having bread for breakfast?" Masamichi asked.

Shino finally put down his paper and indicated the kitchen with his chin.

"There's bread that I just went out and bought."

Masamichi's eyes widened in surprise.

"You just went out and bought it? It's eight o'clock now… Have you been out somewhere already?"

"The breeze was cool and pleasant this morning. It reminded me of the winds that used to blow in Toribeno, so I went out for a short walk."

"Toribeno?"

"Toribeno, the capital's burial ground. It was strewn with rotting remains and white bones everywhere—"

"Oh, okay, got it! I'm sorry I asked. It isn't a great topic for a lovely morning."

His interruption instantly put Shino in a bad mood, so Masamichi apologized and forced the conversation back to what they'd been talking about.

"So, you got up early, went for a morning walk, and bought bread?"

Shino still appeared annoyed but did not hesitate to answer Masamichi's question, although briefly.

"I didn't get up early."

"Hmm?"

"I got absorbed in a book and read all night."

Now that he mentioned it, Shino was wearing the same long-sleeved black T-shirt and black jeans he'd been wearing the night before, when Masamichi said good night to him.

Suddenly intrigued, he sat up a fraction and asked, "What kind of book? Was it a picture scroll or an ancient document again? The kind I couldn't understand, even if I borrowed it from you?"

Shino then roughly folded his newspaper, placed it on the tatami mat, picked up the *book* that he had brought to the tea room, and turned its cover toward Masamichi.

Contrary to Masamichi's expectations, it was a hardcover book that looked brand-new.

The stiff white cover bore a painting-like illustration that showed monks busy at work.

The title was in English, written in a classic-style script.

Masamichi appeared surprised and asked, "You were reading a Western book?"

"I found it at an airport bookstore in London while we were waiting for our flight home and purchased it," Shino replied matter-of-factly.

"When did you do that?! Is it a novel with a friar as the main character or something? I recall watching a British TV show about a monk when I was growing up."

A nostalgic look appeared on Masamichi's face, and Shino held out the book to him.

Masamichi took it and flipped through the pages. Of course the text was in English.

He couldn't immediately understand what it was about, but it looked pretty interesting, filled with colorful photos and drawings of monks and churches.

"It doesn't look like a novel."

"No. As the title *How to Live Like a Monk* says, it introduces the lives and attitudes of medieval monks and suggests applying them to our lives today."

Masamichi looked from a page in the book to Shino and back again and groaned in admiration.

"It looks interesting, but I couldn't possibly read it. I'm surprised that you have no trouble reading English books, Shino. That's amazing."

"Anyone with a dictionary can read. Besides, I heard that most humans study English at school."

Masamichi smiled bashfully, closed the book, and handed it back to Shino.

"That's true, but I don't think I'd ever feel like reading an English book with the help of a dictionary. Even if it interests me, I'd wait until the Japanese edition came out. You're really conscientious, Shino."

"It has nothing to do with being conscientious. It's just a matter of whether a book can satisfy my curiosity."

"Yeah? In my case, I think laziness would outweigh my curiosity. But why are you reading a book like that? Do you want to live like a monk?"

"Don't be silly," Shino said immediately. His expression did not change, so he wasn't mad, but he must have wanted to clarify his point.

"Precepts are the furthest thing from a specter's mind."

"Right!"

Shino glared at Masamichi for readily agreeing, and the younger man cowered.

"Then why were you reading that book all night long?" Shino considered that a minute.

"I'm interested in religions, both Western and Eastern."

"You're interested in *religion*?"

Masamichi was so surprised this time that he couldn't help raising his voice. Shino frowned disapprovingly and continued, "Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to take up a religion or anything."

"G-good. I mean, I don't know if it's good, but I'm a bit relieved. Specters don't…have a faith, do they?"

"No. The only thing a specter believes in is themself. That's why I have no idea what goes through human minds as they take refuge in such unknowns as God or Buddha. That's precisely why it interests me," Shino explained in his usual grumpy but honest way, and Masamichi nodded in understanding.

"Oh, I see… Now that you mention it, I don't know why people rely on religion, either," Masamichi said, choosing his words carefully as he cocked his head. "I'm not particularly religious or anything, but I do like to visit temples at New Year's, and I get depressed if I end up drawing a fortune that says I'm down on my luck. There's also *houji*, our Buddhist-style family memorial services, and…"

"Houji. That's it," Shino said, interrupting Masamichi as he looked around the tea room.

"Daizou and Yoriko died one after the other, and I served as a pallbearer and held two small funerals, as per their wishes."

Hearing that for the first time, Masamichi straightened his back and sat up properly.

"I see. I never thought about it before, but funerals… I'm impressed that a specter like you gave them funerals, though, of course, they probably didn't know that you weren't human."

"I never bothered telling them. I didn't think they needed to know."

Masamichi agreed with a serious look on his face.

"I get that. But didn't Daizou and Yoriko have any other relatives?"

Still maintaining his grumpy expression, Shino answered vaguely, which wasn't like him.

"It wasn't that they didn't have any relatives, but they wrote in their wills that they wanted me to give them funerals here at this house. I didn't have a choice."

Surprised, Masamichi glanced around the small tea room, then the store area, where stacks of old items were piled high, like mountains.

Neither area seemed suited to hold a wake or a funeral.

"Did you really have their funerals here? Where?"

Shino raised his eyebrows.

"The room where I sleep. The funeral director placed fresh flowers on either side of their caskets, since we didn't have the space to set up an altar. The smell…of lilies filled the room, and it made me feel strange."

"I know what you mean! Lilies have a surprisingly strong scent. It's more of a unique scent than pleasant… But, yeah, I see. There's hardly anything in your room, and even with a casket taking up space, a few people could fit in there."

"We opened the sliding doors and also used the room with the wooden floor. It wasn't an issue, since we put cushions on the floor."

Shino glanced toward his room and spoke like he was remembering the time, though he still sounded bored.

"A monk I'd never met before came on recommendation from the funeral home, and he recited a sutra that wasn't particularly interesting; I paid him, and he left. It was truly baffling to think that humans would be grateful for something like that."

"Oh… I want to tell you that you shouldn't talk that way, but I can understand your perspective. Hmm, what am I supposed to do?"

Shino continued talking, oblivious to Masamichi's confusion.

"Shrines, temples, and churches are all the same in that they charge their customers for their services. I don't understand the point of giving them that authority based on some mysterious sense of gratitude."

"Ngh…" Masamichi groaned, well aware that he couldn't speak on behalf of all humans. "As a member of the human race who half-heartedly believes in God and Buddha, it's hard for me to comment on that. But maybe the monk would have been more sympathetic in mourning the deceased if you associated with him regularly."

"Well, maybe that incomprehensible complexity and ambiguity are what make humans interesting. Like the monk in this book, there are likely those who would rather follow the teachings of God and the church and live a fulfilling life within their framework. There does seem to be a certain number of humans who want others to set the boundaries for their lives."

Shino said that and then looked at Masamichi intently.

"Ngh!"

Masamichi put a hand over his heart.

The specter was blaming and teasing him. Shino knew all about his lack of initiative and his college application to an agriculture department in the hopes of helping his farmer parents and grandparents one day—and that it wasn't truly something he'd wanted for himself.

"That's…right. I'm sorry."

Shino looked amused by Masamichi's dejected reaction and said, "Whatever. Don't you have anything to do this morning? Why don't you hurry up and eat your breakfast?"

“Oh, yeah.” Masamichi gasped and jumped to his feet. “We got sidetracked, but are you saying you got up and went for a walk after reading all night and stopped by the bakery? How energetic.”

Shino nodded as he sipped his coffee.

“I’m a specter. I don’t need to sleep. Staying up all night would never get in the way of a mere walk… I went into an alley I don’t usually enter and found a small bakery. I could see through the window and saw the owner arranging freshly baked bread. I liked the meticulous way he was doing that and decided to buy some of that bread.”

“I see. The smell of bread baking would have attracted me, but you took note of the way the owner was displaying his wares, huh? I can hardly wait to taste it.”

Masamichi went to the kitchen and opened a thin paper bag that sat on the counter.

Inside were four croissants that were a dark golden-brown and baked to perfection. The buttery aroma wafting through the air was utterly tempting.

“You haven’t eaten yet, have you, Shino? Let’s eat together.”

There was no response. Unless the man said no, it meant he wouldn’t mind doing as Masamichi suggested.

Masamichi poured the coffee that Shino had brewed into his own mug, placed the paper bag and small plates on a tray, and took them to the tea room table.

“They’re still a little warm. I’m not the one who should be saying this, but here you go.”

Masamichi opened the bag wide and held it out to Shino.

Shino reached into the bag, took out a croissant, placed it on a plate, and stood up.

A low cupboard divided the tea room from the kitchen. Shino placed the plate in front of what appeared to be a small wooden Buddha statue at the end of the cupboard, returned to the table as if nothing had happened, reached in the bag for another croissant, opened his mouth, and devoured it.

He didn’t care about the flaky pieces that fell on the table as he crunched into it.

“Mmm,” Masamichi said as he took his own croissant from the bag and placed it on his plate. Then he looked curiously at the Buddha statue. “That statue has been sitting there forever… It’s a wood-carved Buddha, isn’t it?”

“It’s a statue of Buddha by Enkuu,” Shino answered shortly, munching on his croissant.

“Enkuu?”

“A sculptor of Buddhist images during the Edo period. He traveled throughout Japan and left behind many statues.”

“Oh, I might have heard of him before! I saw a photo of him during my art class in junior high. He carved in a zigzag motion… with a single knife, right?”

Shino nodded subtly.

“That’s correct. Though in reality, he seemed to have used a variety of different carving knives.”

“He did?”

“Daizou said Enkuu made simple sculptures. He produced large numbers of Buddha images that commoners could easily obtain and worship, which would eventually return to nature. He also said it was ironic that today those statues are being traded as expensive antiques.”

Shino sometimes shared stories about the previous owner and his wife.

The specter remained calm and didn’t display any particular emotion, but Masamichi was glad to know that Shino had special feelings for the two people who had loved him like a grandson, though the specter would never admit it.

“So, that’s the story behind that Buddhist statue. Oh, is it terribly expensive, then? Oh, no. It sits there so casually that I sometimes pat its head as I pass by.”

Seeing how flustered Masamichi was, Shino said, “That’s fine.” Then he added, “That is indeed what Enkuu wanted and how Daizou

wanted that Buddhist statue to be treated. Daizou obtained the Enkuu Buddha from an apartment he was asked to clean, and he kept it instead of selling it. He intentionally refrained from worshipping it ostentatiously every day. He made offerings of pretty flowers when they bloomed in the garden, delicious food when he bought something nice, and treated it like family by patting and dusting it."

Listening to Shino speak about the previous owner's unpretentious, matter-of-fact ways, Masamichi could vividly envision the old man's gentle, mild-mannered personality, though he had never met the man.

"He treated it like family, huh…? That's why you offered it a croissant just now?"

"I had forgotten all about doing things like that since Daizou and Yoriko died, but I remembered a time when Yoriko came home with a large bag of tiny croissants and offered one to the Buddha statue as she shoved one in my mouth."

"Heh-heh. She shoved one in your mouth?"

Masamichi smiled, imagining a petite elderly lady putting a croissant in Shino's mouth and saying, "Ahh," as a grandmother would say to her grandchild.

Shino is tall, so he probably bent down for her, even if he probably acted reluctant.

But despite the warm feelings in his heart, something occurred to Masamichi.

Shino had funeral services for Daizou and Yoriko here, yet he didn't have a Buddhist altar or mortuary tablets for them. I know he isn't religious, since he's a specter, but still…

He was curious, but he felt uncomfortable asking Shino a sensitive question like that.

Maybe that Buddha statue is a substitute for an altar.

All this time, Masamichi had been looking at the statue, thinking it was coarsely made, and presuming some amateur must have

made it. But now that he'd heard that it was an expensive item that a famous Buddhist sculptor had carved, he suddenly appreciated it.

Unconcerned about Masamichi's feelings, Shino said bluntly, "These croissants aren't bad. Hurry up and eat them."

"Oh, right!"

Masamichi quickly picked up a croissant and took a tiny bite out of its narrow edge.

It made a light, airy sound as he ate that was neither a crunch nor a crush. Like Shino, he was dropping flakes on his plate, and pieces of the bread scattered like a thin veil.

The outside of the croissant was crispy, crunchy, and fragrant, and it was light and fluffy on the inside—like he was eating a cloud. And the rich, buttery aroma was heavenly.

"Wow, this is fantastic! You have an eye for good stuff, Shino!"

"Naturally. Don't underestimate your master, servant."

Shino finished his croissant in the blink of an eye, took another out of the bag, and bit into it.

He was a wild eater, which didn't match his beautiful features. But no matter how boldly he dug in, none of his elegance was lost, perhaps thanks to the training that Tokifuyu Tatsumi, the man who had been his master, instilled. Or maybe due to the previous Bougyoudou owners and their guidance.

As for Masamichi, he carefully took bites of his croissant a little at a time, as if it were the most precious thing in the world, looking like a squirrel or a hamster. He cocked his head and said, "Croissants are French, aren't they? I wonder if French people eat croissants in the morning. Or do they eat French bread…baguettes?"

"I don't know. This is Japan."

Although he was well-versed in a wide range of fields, Shino was completely indifferent to matters outside his interests, which made Masamichi chuckle.

"…Shino, you sometimes sound like a stubborn old man. Oh, but you're more than just an old man when we consider your age."

"Did you say something?"

"Oh, no, nothing!"

"Besides, I doubt that the French would be happy to have their eating habits lumped together as a country. It's the same as with the Japanese. What to eat for breakfast, and for that matter, the question as to whether an individual eats breakfast at all—such dietary habits will vary."

"Yeah, you've got a point there. It usually does sound suspicious when someone generalizes about how people do things in a certain country."

"At best, it's often just a story about a particular area of a country where the individual has been. Humans do things so differently from each other that it's staggering. That's what makes them foolish yet interesting."

With that said, Shino gobbled up a second croissant and drank his black coffee.

"Today, I'm going to sort through some of the vessels we received the other day."

"Oh, yeah," Masamichi said and nodded.

After Masamichi had repeatedly asked Shino to tell him of his plans, since it would be a hassle for him as a servant not to know where his master was and what he was doing, the specter finally began informing Masamichi of his general plans for the day.

"The three cardboard boxes we took in when that person said they were clearing things out to prepare for the end of their life. Can you handle it alone?" Masamichi asked.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Shino asked, glaring at him, annoyed.

"Pardon me. I have to get to my prep school for class, and I will be back in the evening. Do you want me to pick up anything on my way home?"

"Let me think." Shino thought about it for about ten seconds. "The deep-fried tofu you bought, which I didn't even ask you to get, was pretty good. Get more of that. It's convenient that we only need to grill it and pour soy sauce and ginger over it."

“Right! That deep-fried tofu was fantastic. I’ll get some if they have any left.”

Masamichi washed down the last bite of his croissant with black coffee.

Actually, he preferred his coffee with a little sugar and plenty of milk, but he was inclined to cut back a little, considering his lack of exercise and the calories in the croissant.

After gathering up the crumbs scattered in front of Shino and carrying his plate and mug to the kitchen, he tidied up, went back to his room, and then came back to the tea room with his shoulder bag.

“I’m off, then.”

“All right.”

Shino had the newspaper spread in front of him again, hiding his face.

“Thanks for the croissants. Bye!”

Still no reply from Shino, but that was the norm.

Not feeling particularly anxious, Masamichi smiled as he walked out of the store, passing by the vessels that had become familiar by then.

Shino was right. It was a pleasant morning.

Perhaps the temperature would rise rapidly during the day, but at the moment, thin clouds floated against the clear sky—typical of autumn—as if swept by a brush.

“Okay, then. I made up my mind to keep studying, so that’s what I’m going to do,” Masamichi muttered to himself, grateful to Shino for covering his tuition. He then slapped his cheeks with his hands to fire himself up and picked up his pace.

It was an ordinary day, no different from any other.

Only a few hours later, Masamichi would realize that a day like that would never be the norm for the servant of a specter…

* *

“Okay, class. Any math questions?”

The woman's voice came from a short distance away, and Masamichi looked up from his textbook.

He was now seated in one of the many classrooms at his prep school.

Unlike in regular classrooms with desks and chairs, Masamichi and the other students who had failed their initial college entrance exams were gathered in a self-study-type classroom divided into individual booths.

All such students were packed into the same room, so they weren't necessarily receiving instruction in the same subjects.

Each student studied with the textbooks and drill books of their choice, and the system was set up for several instructors to be on hand to answer any questions they had, providing it was during class.

The English teacher doesn't look busy, so I'll ask him a question.

Masamichi slowly raised his hand.

"Excuse me, I have a question about English."

His voice was unsteady and feeble, and he wasn't good at speaking out loud in public. It wasn't surprising that customers and colleagues alike weren't happy with him when he served customers in his old bar job.

"Oh, okay. Uh, what was your name again?"

The young instructor, who had been taking numerous questions from students, smiled innocently at Masamichi.

"My name is Adachi."

"Oh, yes, that's it. Aoki."

"Adachi."

"Oops, sorry."

"No problem."

Masamichi sighed inwardly, but he wasn't particularly offended.

Back in grade school, some of his classmates had bullied him a little because of his frail health and frequent absences.

Since then, through trial and error, he'd developed a way to avoid being bullied, and that resulted in him going unnoticed.

Instead of picking on him, people stopped noticing his existence entirely.

It was lonely and made him feel empty, but it was also pleasant for shy Masamichi, and he continued to make himself invisible when many people were around.

It's probably my fault that the teachers have a tough time remembering my name and my face.

Gritting his teeth at the bitterness, Masamichi pointed to the question he wanted to ask about.

"I never quite understand how to use these words, *no more than*."

The instructor smiled brightly and said, "Aha. That's the *whale syntax*. A sentence structure that trips everyone up."

"The…whale syntax?"

As Masamichi sat totally baffled by the unfamiliar words, the instructor pulled up a chair, took a pen out of his shirt's breast pocket, and moved Masamichi's notebook toward himself.

He quickly wrote down what he was talking about.

A whale is no more a fish than a horse is.

"Here you go. You've seen it before, haven't you?"

Masamichi curiously tilted his head.

"Sorry, I don't think so. A…whale?"

"That's what a certain prep school teacher started calling it. Don't tell me you've never heard of it. You have got to be kidding. You failed your college entrance exam twice, didn't you? What kind of studying have you been doing? It's super famous."

"S-sorry."

The point of attending a prep school was to learn things he didn't know. Masamichi shouldn't have had to apologize, but he did so reflexively when the instructor seemed to condemn him for his lack of common sense, and he bit his lip in mild self-loathing.

The instructor didn't seem to notice Masamichi's feelings of shame and continued to speak rapidly, as if this was something he did every day.

"*No more than something*…means *not the same as something*. Okay?"

"…Oh, okay."

"You don't get it, do you? I can tell by your voice and the look on your face. Consider the last part of what I said. You know what a horse is, right?"

"Y-yes."

"A horse isn't a fish. That's obvious, correct?"

Masamichi cautiously agreed.

"Right."

"Translate that into Japanese, and it comes at the beginning of the sentence. What happens then?"

"…Um… In the same way that a horse isn't a fish, a whale isn't a fish, either… Is that right?"

"Precisely! You got it in one try. That's what I was trying to tell you. So, what about the sentence don't you understand? Try translating it."

Still hesitant, Masamichi said in a low voice, to avoid disturbing the other students who were studying, "*I can no more swim than fly.* Um, does it mean I can't swim in the same way that I can't fly?"

The instructor's expression became an exaggerated frown, and he wagged his finger at Masamichi.

"*Tsk*, *tsk!* That's a little stiff. Try translating it a little more naturally. Give it another try!"

"Huh…? Um, all right."

At the instructor's insistence, Masamichi made an effort to come up with an answer even though he was struggling to get into the swing of things.

"I can't fly, and I can't swim…?"

"Bingo! See? You can do it if you calm down and think! Way to go."

The instructors at the prep school appeared to have a motto of *praising and nurturing*. The one speaking with Masamichi gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and went out of his way to commend him.

"Th-thank you," Masamichi said, bowing, then exhaling.

But his relief was short-lived.

"Hey. Don't casually touch something that belongs to me."

Hearing the familiar voice, Masamichi jumped a few millimeters from his seat.

"Huh?"

The instructor was also startled. He removed his hand from Masamichi's shoulder and immediately stood up and braced himself.

"Huh…?"

Too surprised to get on his feet, Masamichi slowly looked up.

He hadn't thought it possible, but it was indeed Shino, looking grim as he stood next to his booth.

You have got to be kidding me.

It was nonsense to wonder when he'd gotten there. He was a specter. Masamichi was well aware that Shino could move without making the slightest sound if he wanted.

"Sh-Shino?"

"Huh?! What?! Is this man an acquaintance of yours?"

The instructor slowly retreated one step at a time. He looked from Shino to Masamichi and back again, and a nervous sound came out of his mouth.

The other students who had been quietly studying turned their heads from their respective booths, realizing that something unusual was taking place.

Dismayed by the stares coming at him from all directions, Masamichi whispered to Shino, "Wh-what's up? What are you doing here?"

Then Shino said flatly in his usual blunt tone, "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have business to tend to. We're leaving now. Follow me."

"Huh? You didn't mention it this morning!!"

"Something has come up. Now, hurry."

"What's come up?"

"Never mind. Just get moving."

As soon as he said that, Shino grabbed a stunned Masamichi by the wrist and headed for the hallway.

"Whoa! Shino, just a minute."

"Hey. Hey, what are you doing with our student…?"

Finally returning to his senses, the instructor waved his hands in a rush and tried to restrain Shino but was overwhelmed by the dangerous aura Shino emitted from his entire being.

"A-Akashi, do you know that man?"

"The name's Adachi! And, um, he's…my guardian? Yes, he's my guardian. Shino, wait. Let me get my bag!"

Masamichi somehow managed to stay on his feet as he tossed his notebook and pen case into his shoulder bag with his free hand.

Shino watched him, still holding Masamichi's other hand, and then started walking at his usual speed.

"Excuse me! Sorry to have disturbed you," Masamichi managed, then walked out…no, he was dragged out of the room by Shino.

"Hey, you, you can't go to our study rooms without permission!"

"I told him to wait."

A female receptionist and a male staff member that she must have called on came rushing over, gasping for breath. But Shino ignored them completely and continued walking.

"I'm sorry for the disruption…," Masamichi said, trying to apologize, but Shino wasn't slowing down at all.

He was led out of the prep school, eyed curiously by everyone who passed them.

"Hey, Shino. Seriously, what's come over you? Everyone in my class was stunned. And what you said—"

"What did I say?"

"'*Something that belongs to me*'…? Geez."

"You have no right to complain. All I did was listen to you when you so brazenly insisted that I not use the word *servant* in public."

Ah. Masamichi held his head, recalling that, but tried to argue.

"O-okay, thanks. But *something that belongs to me* might be a bit too misleading."

"Misleading, my foot. Don't tell me you've forgotten the fact that every strand of your hair and every last drop of your blood is mine."

"I realize that, but… Oh, man. Anyway, what the heck is going on? Oh, and isn't it about time you let go of my hand?"

"Hmph."

Shino finally released his hand, and Masamichi slung his bag over his shoulder properly.

The wrist that Shino had been gripping ached and throbbed. He'd been too shocked by Shino's sudden appearance to realize the strength of Shino's hold.

Shino didn't immediately answer Masamichi's question. Instead, he raised his hand, flagged a cab that was passing by, and got into the car.

With no idea what was going on, Masamichi joined him in the back seat and fastened his seat belt.

Shino told the driver to take them to a train station where the bullet train made a stop.

"Are we going somewhere?" Masamichi asked, still confused but finally settling down.

He noticed that Shino was wearing a suit—the kind he wore to his business meetings.

"Did you receive a request to pick up some items from a store or somewhere?" Masamichi asked, although he doubted that would be the case.

Though he troubled Shino by being a carefree sort of servant, Masamichi felt like Shino actually cared about his welfare. For example, Shino gave him plenty of time to dedicate to his studies.

The specter had never done something as drastic as barging in to his prep school and dragging him out.

It has to be pretty serious, Masamichi thought, and he waited for Shino to speak. The specter then gave him a minimal explanation, as

usual.

"We're going to Kobe."

"Kobe?! In Hyogo Prefecture?"

"That's correct."

"That's awfully far away. What happened? Or rather, what are we going to be doing in Kobe?"

"I don't know."

"Huh?"

This time, Shino sighed briefly and gave his stunned servant a few more specifics.

"Daizou had a sister. She was the only person he and Yoriko could call a relative."

Masamichi recalled his conversation with Shino that morning and said, "Really?" He held his bag in his lap and urged the specter to go on.

"Daizou was concerned about his younger sister and arranged for me to receive notification if anything ever happened to her."

"What? Don't tell me something happened to her?"

"A hospital called me a while ago, saying she was admitted earlier today. It's a hassle, but I promised Daizou I'd look out for her. I need to check on her with my own eyes."

Masamichi finally understood at least a part of the situation, and his soft expression clouded over.

"That's worrying. Did they tell you about her condition?"

"I'll see for myself when I get there. Nothing is more of a waste of time than having a lengthy conversation over the phone."

"…That's just like you, Shino." Chuckling wryly, Masamichi finally sat back in the cab, feeling settled. "So, that's why you rushed over to my prep school to pick me up?"

"…I wasn't rushing. But it would be troublesome if we took our time getting to Kobe and she happened to die. I should ask her for instructions on what to do when she dies."

"Don't say things like that! It might bring bad luck!"

"It's only natural. I wouldn't be doing right by Daizou if I didn't ask his sister what she wanted and just took care of matters systematically. I'm a specter who keeps his word," Shino declared, before he looked forward.

"Yeah," Masamichi said simply as he stared at the other man's perfect face.

That's true. Shino's been keeping the promise he made to me, too. He hasn't been forcing me to accept him in bed since I refused, though he sometimes kisses me, telling me to give him my "chi" energy. That wasn't really…a kiss. It's more like he sees my mouth as a faucet or something…

Still, Masamichi's heart automatically started beating faster when he recalled the feel of Shino's ice-cold lips.

Masamichi fanned his suddenly warm cheeks with a hand and purposely asked Shino another question to divert his attention.

"Are you sure it's okay to take me with you for something so important and personal?"

Shino gave Masamichi a sideways glance, glaring at him without moving his face a millimeter.

"Maybe you were planning to spread your wings while I was gone, but that's not going to happen."

"That's not what I was thinking. I'll handle any chores you have for me. I just wondered if I'd be intruding, that's all."

Shino sighed and said, "If I see you as intruding, then all I'll need to do is make you go out in the hallway. But…with so many complicated procedures, hospitals are a royal pain in the neck."

"Oh!" Masamichi exclaimed with a clap of the hands. "Are you talking about things like the hospitalization process, renting stuff at the hospital, and paying?"

Shino nodded and added bitterly, "Yoriko took care of things when Daizou was ill, and I handled those tasks when she was hospitalized. I remember it being quite troublesome. If necessary, you can take care of it today."

Masamichi smiled and nodded.

"Okay. When I was a child, I was frequently hospitalized due to my weak health. My parents were the ones who took care of all the procedures, but I think I have a better understanding of what a patient needs and the inconveniences they may face than the average person. I'll do anything to help."

"Then start with a get-well gift."

"Huh?"

"Think about what to take her. Daizou wanted sake and was scolded by a nurse, while Yoriko wanted flowers. I don't know what this woman wants. What is generally suitable?"

Masamichi's smile deepened when he heard that Shino intended to visit the woman.

I didn't think they were very close, because he suddenly started calling her "this woman" and "that woman," but I'm glad they're close enough for him to consider taking her a gift.

Relieved but wondering about another concern, Masamichi said, "Gifts to take to a person in the hospital depend on the hospital and the person's medical condition."

Shino finally looked at Masamichi, his shapely eyebrows a little furrowed.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. What's the name of the hospital? They might have information about things like that on their website."

Without having to confirm any details, Shino mentioned the name of a general hospital in Kobe.

"Got it. I'll check it out," Masamichi said. He searched the hospital online on his phone and accessed its official website.

The section titled *For visitors coming to see hospitalized patients* provided visiting hours and various things to note.

"No raising a commotion, no running…geez, we aren't kids… It also says there's an area in front of the nurses' station on each floor where we can visit with the patients if they can move around."

"…I see."

“As for gifts that we can take her… Oh, here it is. It says if you’re bringing flowers, they only allow arrangements that don’t need to be watered.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shino asked suspiciously.

Inclining his head uncertainly, Masamichi said, “My grandmother once told me that you shouldn’t take potted plants to someone in the hospital because it suggests that they’d *take root* at the hospital.”

Instead of snickering and saying it was nonsense, as Masamichi expected, Shino surprised him with a small nod and said, “I see.”

“Huh? Aren’t you going to say that’s silly or something?”

Shino answered with a straight face.

“Humans are creatures who manipulate words. And Tokifuyu said every word is a curse.”

Whenever Shino mentioned his late master, he spoke in a voice that was a mix of anger and resentment, with a hint of nostalgia. That was Masamichi’s impression, but he didn’t think he was far off the mark.

“A curse?”

“A curse. A spell. Whether the intention is yin or yang—dark or light—it will have some effect on the person to whom the words are spoken. Thus, it’s reasonable for a person in a hospital to receive a plant with roots and feel that they’re expected to *take root* there.”

“…Okay.”

“What about regular cut flowers?”

“Oh, this is just what I think, but you need a vase for cut flowers, right? You also need to change the water, and the sink gets dirty as well.”

“…Hmm. I knew it would be tricky.”

“A hospital is a public place. It’s also a place that has physically weak people, so you have to be more careful than you usually are. Oh, and this hospital says they generally don’t allow food to be brought in.”

“Is that so?”

"Yeah. I was lucky when I was young. My doctor said it was okay for people to bring me jelly desserts and ice cream. But I figure hospitals don't often allow it because eating everything you want can sometimes interfere with your treatment."

"That's troublesome."

"Uh-huh. No matter what you do, it's uncomfortable to be hospitalized. But the best thing that could happen is to get well quickly and go home."

"The number of people unable to return home can't be small. It's not a fair trade-off if you lose your life without freedom."

"There you go again, saying something tough to respond to! But…yeah, I see your point."

Masamichi nodded in agreement, thought for a moment, and said, "How about we go to the hospital without any gifts today and see if she needs anything during her hospital stay? Then we can buy it and take it to her. There must be things that only she would notice, and she probably didn't have time to prepare adequately if she was taken in as an emergency patient."

"Ah. I can see that a human is best suited to think about what another human needs," Shino said, looking uncharacteristically impressed. Then he turned his gaze out the window.

Meanwhile, Masamichi put his phone in his bag and finally looked calmly at Shino sitting next to him.

Dressed in a well-tailored suit, he could have stepped out of a page in a fashion magazine.

He was picture-perfect, with his long legs crossed and his chin resting in his hand against the window frame. The image could have been used for a magazine spread.

Masamichi slowly exhaled as he admired the beauty of Shino's lightly wavy hair, which reflected the morning sunlight shining through the window.

Daizou's sister…I wonder what she's like. I hope she isn't too sick to talk, even a little. Oh, I know. I'll go back to that website and

read up on the hospitalization process. She likely didn't have much time to do anything, so I'll ensure I can handle tasks on her behalf.

Masamichi quietly pulled out the phone he had just put away so as not to disturb Shino, who appeared to be lost in thought.

Then, to fulfill his role as a servant, as expected by his master, he opened the hospital website again and carefully began perusing the *Hospital Admission Guidelines* section.

CHAPTER 2

Another Journey

It was past two in the afternoon when their bullet train arrived at the Shin-Osaka Train Station.

Distance-wise, it's closer to get off at Shin-Kobe Station, but the transfers on the conventional train lines are much easier from Shin-Osaka.

The process went more smoothly than expected. After taking the local bus for about half an hour and a less-than-ten-minute cab ride, Shino and Masamichi arrived at the hospital.

"I heard that Kobe is close to the sea and the mountains, but the mountains are super close, with a steep hill suddenly there as soon as we walked out of the station and got into a cab," Masamichi noted at the hospital entrance.

Shino agreed, strolling with such confidence that it was hard to believe it was his first time there. "Yeah. It is a tough place for a person in failing health to come."

"Right. But I thought I saw a shuttle bus parked out front, so they probably offer rides to their patients. Now, where's the patient ward…?"

"I heard it's the east wing. Over there."

"Have you been here before?" Masamichi asked, surprised that Shino kept walking without a bit of hesitation.

"No."

"But you seem really familiar with where the wards are, when there must be a number of buildings here."

"There was that hospital floor plan just inside the automatic doors."

"Really? I didn't notice. You were walking so fast. You must have only glanced at it for a second."

"One second is plenty of time to look at something like that."

"L-leave it to a specter. Did you ask which floor she's on?"

"I did when the hospital called."

As they talked, Shino continued to walk briskly ahead, dodging outpatients who came his way. Masamichi had a feeling that if he lost sight of him here, he might never be able to see him again, and he quickly chased after his master as he proceeded forward with his fine posture.

They reached the patient wing on the second floor of the east wing in no time.

While Shino spoke to a nurse at the nurses' station, Masamichi examined the floor plan posted near the elevator and kept tilting his head.

He knew the hospital was built on a considerable slope, and it complicated the building's floor arrangement.

Oh, so the entrance we came in through is on the third floor and not the first. That's why we have to go down the escalator, even when we're here on the second floor.

Shino returned as he made an effort to memorize the building's structure and pointed to a long hallway.

"Over there," he said. "They said the patients just had lunch, and no examinations or consultations are scheduled."

"Good! So we can see Daizou's sister, huh?"

"I was told it would be no problem at all. They didn't have to bother asking me to come if she's that well…"

"Oh, don't say that. We've come all the way here, so smile and visit her."

"Why should I smile without a reason? I'll let you handle the foolish human habit of flashing a forced smile at others."

"It isn't as if I put on a fake smile all the time… And more than anything, I've never met her before. I think I'll tense up when I see

her," Masamichi muttered, already nervous, as his inborn shyness surfaced.

He had never even met Bougyoudou's previous owner and his wife. And this was the man's sister. Masamichi had no idea what kind of person to expect when he walked into her room.

But anyway, I'm a little relieved that we can visit her, since that must mean she isn't seriously sick.

Shino walked at the same speed as he did at home and entered a room with four beds about halfway down the corridor and to the left.

He went over to the bed by the window and said curtly, "I'm here."

Even during a hospital visit, he doesn't have a habit of greeting people…!

Sighing at his master's unchanged ways, which was rational in a sense, Masamichi stepped out from behind Shino and bowed in greeting to the woman in the bed.

When he raised his head, he saw white walls typical of a hospital room, a bed with a light wood headboard, bedding covered with a white cover, and an older woman on the bed.

Oh? She might not be quite what I'd expected.

Masamichi blinked in surprise as he mentally chastised himself for his impolite impression.

A photo of the owner and his wife casually sat on a chest in the tea room at home. The cheap-looking frame suggested that the couple, not Shino, had put it there after going somewhere on a trip or something.

He saw it every day, so although he had never actually met them, he was familiar with their appearances.

People often say that married couples gradually start to resemble each other, which was the case with Daizou and Yoriko, who were both plump and petite, with bright, gentle smiles.

But the person lying in front of them, with her head resting on the pillow and her body slightly raised, was watching Shino with an obvious scowl.

As far as Masamichi could see from her chest and up that wasn't covered by the bedding, she wasn't that big, but rather thin. Her facial features were prominent, and her pure-gray hair was cut very short.

She looked to be in her late seventies to early eighties. He knew it wasn't a phrase you used to describe someone in the hospital, but the one that came to mind was *full of vigor*.

She looks kind of cool.

Masamichi was cautiously looking for a chance to introduce himself, when, just like Shino, the woman stared at the specter blankly, without even greeting him.

"I was feeling sick and dizzy when the hospital staff started saying all these things about needing a guarantor, and that they'd contact the person as soon as I gave them the information. I have friends, but I didn't want to intrude on them, so I had no choice but to have them contact you, Shino, not that I wanted you to come."

She had a low, calm voice and spoke rapidly in a local Kansai dialect.

Huh? Is she a local? Does that mean Daizou was from western Japan? And she called him "Shino," like she really knows him!

Masamichi was busy with a roller coaster of emotions, but Shino remained standing by the bed, looking grumpy.

"So you're saying it was okay to intrude on me? I didn't want to come all the way here, either."

"My brother asked you to take care of me."

"He asked me to take care of you after you died. Geez. And here I thought you were going to die soon when they said you'd been brought in as an emergency, but I see that there isn't the slightest sign of that happening."

"H-hey!"

The woman's condition certainly didn't appear as grave as Masamichi had feared. Still, Shino's attitude, however typical of him, wasn't how one would generally act in front of someone in the hospital.

Masamichi could sense that the other patients in the room were listening to what was going on behind the curtain partition.

Shino glared at Masamichi when the young man tugged on his sleeve, then returned his attention to the woman.

"So? What happened?"

"It seems several months ago that something happened," the woman said, apparently unfazed by Shino's words. "I was thinking about it a while ago, since I was bored. I remembered that I slipped and fell on spilled dishwashing liquid in the kitchen and hit my head. The nurse came to see me and said that might have been the cause."

"I don't quite understand that, but does it take three months for a human brain to rot?"

"My brain isn't rotten! My head was bleeding a little, that's all. What's it called again? Sub-something or other hemorrhage? They said a narrow blood vessel on the outside of my brain was damaged, and it kept bleeding, and then the blood clots were pressing against my brain…"

"And it rotted."

"I said it isn't rotten! It was just pressured a bit and ran out of oxygen! I haven't seen you in a while, but you haven't changed at all, saying things a person doesn't want to hear."

"And?"

Shino continued to gather information matter-of-factly, and the woman continued speaking, as if they were making small talk.

"I clean the entrance area to my apartment building every morning," she said. "It's like volunteer work. I went outside with a broomstick and dustpan, and everything started spinning; I felt sick, and I think I collapsed. A high school student headed for some type of morning practice was passing by and found me. And—"

"And you were brought to the hospital."

"Right. I'll have to go and thank the child when I am discharged. They did various tests and said they were medicating me for a day or two, and we'd see how I did. I'll have to have an operation if the

blood clot gets bigger, but it doesn't seem like that big a deal. They told me they'd drill a small hole in my head and remove the blood clot, saying I won't even need general anesthesia."

"Hmm."

"But if not, I'll only have to keep taking my medications."

"From what you've told me, it sounds like you've wasted your time being brought here."

"Maybe that's true, but it's okay to be checked now and then."

"What's okay about that?"

Masamichi stood hiding behind Shino and listened to the exchange, overwhelmed.

It's an intense exchange, but they're perfectly in sync and sound like a comedy duo.

As Masamichi entertained such relaxed thoughts, the woman scared him when she suddenly asked, "And who is he?"

He didn't want Shino to introduce him as his *servant* again, so he quickly said what he'd been thinking he'd say when he met the woman.

"My name is Masamichi Adachi! I work at Bougyoudou."

Masamichi bowed, and the woman's almond eyes blinked in surprise.

"What?! Shino, you brought a part-timer all the way here?"

"Oh, um, I don't work part-time…"

"He's my assistant. I take him wherever I go, whatever the issue may be."

"Th-that's right. Um, how do you do?"

The woman was still dumbfounded but managed to return the greeting.

"Huh. Hello. Oh, I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Chieko Hashimoto. I'm the younger sister of Daizou, the previous owner of Bougyoudou. So, you're Shino's assistant, are you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Uh, I'm sorry about all you've been through," he said shyly, and the woman…Chieko…finally smiled.

Ah. Maybe she looked a little like Daizou when she smiled, Masamichi thought as he gazed intently at her face, which gave him an impression of a strong and reliable individual, despite her sickly complexion.

"Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to come out to Kobe to see me."

"Hey. You should be saying that to me first," Shino groused.

"Okay, okay. But you must be doing well if you can afford to hire an assistant. How is Bougyoudou these days?"

"I don't know how *doing well* should be defined, but business is stable."

"Good for you," Chieko said teasingly as a nurse stepped into the room and called out to Shino.

"Um, Ms. Hashimoto's doctor will be here soon. Would you like to see him? I also need you to fill out some paperwork if you would please come to the nurses' station."

Shino nodded, though "What a bother" was written all over his handsome face.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Masamichi offered.

"No," Shino said. "I can handle it. You stay here and do whatever you can to help."

With that, he followed the nurse out of the room, without a word to Chieko.

Huh…? I'm alone now with a person I've just met.

Of course, Masamichi had planned to help but hadn't expected Shino to leave him stranded so quickly. Because of his shy personality, he was immediately thrown into a tizzy.

However, Chieko seemed more relaxed with Shino gone, and she finally pointed to a chair by her bedside.

"Well, please have a seat. I'm sorry I can't even offer you tea. My mini-fridge is empty, since I've just been admitted to the hospital and am not allowed to eat or drink what I want."

"Oh, please don't worry about it. I'm sorry we came empty-handed. We thought we'd get you a gift after we learned about your

condition and the hospital's rules and regulations. Um, please let me know if you need anything. Your sudden hospitalization must be a big inconvenience, and they probably have a store downstairs where I can shop for you," Masamichi said, still standing, but Chieko shook her head and pointed to the locker by her bed.

"Actually, I can rent everything I need for my stay, so I'm fine for now. Besides, I can walk. I can go downstairs to the store myself. Shopping is a housewife's favorite pastime, you know."

She told Masamichi to never mind that and sit, and he timidly pulled over a folding chair and sat down.

"My doctor asked if I have any speech impediments, a foggy head, or trouble thinking clearly, but a person can't tell those things if they don't talk, so talk to me and let me find out."

"Oh…sure. If I'll suffice."

Still looking restless, Masamichi placed his bag on his lap and planted his hands on top of it.

Chieko reached for a cheap plastic cup of water that sat on her bedside table and chuckled, "This isn't green tea. It's hot water." She took a sip, frowned, and then looked at Masamichi.

"So…Aoki?"

"Adachi," Masamichi gently corrected, recalling that he'd had a similar exchange earlier in the morning.

"Oops, sorry," Chieko apologized and laughed a bit. "Adachi, you're a good boy. You have it tough working under Shino, don't you? He's curt, he isn't personable, and you can't tell what he's thinking at all. How did you meet him? Through a job posting or something?"

Wondering how much to tell Chieko, Masamichi tried to explain their background in as few words as possible.

"No, ma'am. I was in a car accident and was dying when Sh—… Tatsumi saved me. That's how we met. One thing led to another, and I started working for him. I'm a live-in employee now."

"Really?! In that shabby old house?! That makes things worse. He hasn't renovated, has he? It has to be hard on a young man."

Masamichi laughed and shook his head.

"No, I like it."

"You do?"

Nodding yes, Masamichi noticed that Chieko didn't sound like she was speaking with a genuine Kansai dialect but rather with a mixture of the dialect and standard Japanese, which sounded a little strange.

"Um, Ms. Hashimoto…?"

"Chieko is fine. Everyone calls me 'Chie,' so that's okay, too."

"Okay, Chieko. Chieko, are you a Kansai native? And Daizou, too?"

His question was actually an attempt to change the subject so she wouldn't dig deeper for more information on his and Shino's relationship, but Chieko answered happily.

"Nope. Both my brother and I were born and raised in Ibaraki. I moved here when I was in my twenties. My husband worked for a company, and he was transferred. I've lived in Kobe ever since."

"I see. Do you miss Tokyo and the Kanto area?"

"Not at all. This place seems to suit me better. My brother kept telling me to come home, since my husband died fourteen years ago, but I have friends here, and I prefer living here."

"Home is where you make it."

"Exactly. My speech has gotten all mixed up, too, and my friends tease me, saying I speak in a fake Kansai dialect."

"Oh, no, it's very good. The way you mix it up sounds natural."

"Thanks. Oh, gee, I would have felt peace of mind if my brother and Yoriko took in a boy like you instead of Shino."

Worried, Masamichi asked, "Um, Chieko. Don't you like Tatsumi?"

Chieko's attitude toward him was clear.

"I don't know him well enough to not like him. We live so far away from each other. But I was against the idea when I first heard that my brother and his wife were having him live in their house. It was one thing to adopt a child, but it's too dangerous to let a man they knew nothing about move into their home."

"…That's true. You must have been very worried about your brother and his wife."

While Masamichi chose his words carefully, Chieko leaned forward slightly, as if to say that was exactly how she felt. "You've got that right. It's natural to be concerned. But those two wouldn't listen to me. They kept defending him, saying there was nothing to steal at their house, anyway, and that Shino was a good boy. I went to see them out of concern and was stunned to see how handsome he was, but he's so unfriendly and acts so domineering."

"Ahh…"

Masamichi knew that Shino hadn't intended to be *domineering*. Still, it wasn't hard to imagine that in the eyes of an ordinary person like Chieko, Shino's attitude would seem arrogant and intolerable.

"I asked them what they were going to do with such a rude, unfriendly boy at their house when they ran a business there. I suggested his pretty face fooled them."

"Oh…"

"I argued with my brother and Yoriko on the phone a few times after that, and things got a little awkward. We were quite estranged in their final years."

Masamichi felt uncomfortable now that he knew Shino had caused the siblings' relationship to falter.

"Tatsumi caused a rift between you and your brother?!"

"Uh-huh. But looking back, I shouldn't have meddled like some mother-in-law about my brother's affairs. We lived a ways away from each other, and that made me more worried."

"…I think I can understand that."

He didn't want to say bad things about Shino, but he could somehow appreciate how Chieko felt. Chieko's shoulders rose and fell in response to his vague reaction.

She appeared to be a little embarrassed.

"When I visited my brother's house for his funeral, it was the first time I'd been there in a long time. I saw Shino standing by Yoriko's

side, and I realized then that he wasn't suspicious or bad like I'd thought, though he was still as unfriendly as ever."

Shino had just spoken to Masamichi about Daizou's funeral that morning, and Chieko was now telling him about it. This time, it was his turn to lean in.

"I heard that Tatsumi was the pallbearer at the funeral."

"Oh? He's even told you about that? He must really like you, Adachi."

"Ah, uh, I don't know about that."

"Yoriko had lost the use of her arms and legs, and I was worried about her and called her often, but Shino this and Shino that—he was all she talked about. For her, Shino took over the running of the store and took care of her like a real son. He must have been her emotional support."

Masamichi quietly exhaled.

It was because he was hearing from someone else about those days past for the first time and could form a better image of Shino's and Yoriko's peaceful days together.

"Yoriko would tell me that Shino's cooking was improving, that he'd push her wheelchair and take her out for walks or to go shopping, and he'd put his hands against her shoulders, back, and other aches and make the pain go away. It was like a religion at the end," Chieko said, laughing. Then she suddenly added, with a solemn look on her face, "When Yoriko passed away, I said to Shino at her funeral that although he may have inherited the shop from her, I couldn't let him keep their mortuary tablets and that I'd take care of them. I also told him that I'd take their remains to the grave near our birth home that's been in our family for generations."

"Oh…! That's why he doesn't have their mortuary tablets or a Buddhist altar for them at Bougyoudou."

He clapped once on finally learning the truth, and Chieko gave him a slight nod.

"That's right. Then, Shino goes, 'That's reasonable.' What do you think he said after that?"

"What…did he say?"

Chieko lowered her voice and whispered, as if she was letting Masamichi in on a secret.

"He said I'm alone with no one to take care of things after I die, that Daizou asked him to take care of me in the event of an emergency, but not to worry…he'd give me a proper funeral and collect our three mortuary tablets."

Shino…what a way to say it!

Chieko must have sensed Masamichi's panic. "Ha-ha-ha," she laughed out loud. "I know it's a terrible way to put it, but once I calmed down and thought about it, I thought it was very responsible of him. Sure, my brother and his wife took him in, but he's been taking care of the store since they died, and he's even looking out for me when I'm practically a stranger to him… Really. He may be gruff, but I just realized how much he worries about me."

Chieko smiled shyly.

"I never dreamed that he'd come to see me so soon. I thought he might not come out here at all—maybe on a weekend when business slowed down. He has a sharp tongue, and he isn't friendly, but he's serious and disciplined. A lot may happen, but I want you to know that."

"Chieko…"

"I said bad things about him when we first met, so it's embarrassing to say these things to him now."

"Right. But I think he can tell how you feel. I know, too, that Shi—… I mean, Tatsumi is very kind."

"Yeah?"

Intrigued by Masamichi's response, Chieko started to ask for specific examples of Shino's kindness.

Masamichi didn't know if the timing was good or bad, but that was when Shino came back after finishing the paperwork.

"Oh. Please." Masamichi stood up and tried to offer Shino the only available chair.

But Shino refused brusquely, saying, "I don't need it." He remained standing, looked down at Chieko's face, and quietly said, "Subdural hematoma."

"Oh, yeah, that's it! Did the doctor tell you that?"

"Is that the name of her condition?"

Thinking it rude to sit when Shino was on his feet, Masamichi folded the chair without making a sound.

"Yeah. The doctor explained it to me. I guess you aren't going to die for a while yet, after all."

"…Geez. There you go again."

Shino ignored Masamichi's reproach and continued. "I've signed the document as your guarantor. I heard they have a private room available, so I'll arrange it for you if you like. Don't worry about the expenses…"

Chieko firmly rejected the idea.

"I don't need it. You promised my brother that you'd take care of things when I die. You shouldn't spend your precious money on things like this. Spend it on the store that Daizou left you and on Adachi. You dragged him all the way out here today, so treat him to a nice dinner."

"You don't need to tell me that. This guy is my ser—"

"Anyway!" Masamichi quickly interrupted so Shino wouldn't complicate things by telling Chieko that he was a *servant*. "Uh… Oh, I know, a TV! You want a TV here, don't you? I'll go and ask for a rental."

With that, Masamichi headed out of the room and carefully looked back at Chieko and Shino.

Their exchange seemed strained, but there seemed to be a mellow air of serenity between them.

Please, God, don't let Shino tell her I'm his "servant" while I'm out of the room!

With a prayer, Masamichi headed for the nurses' station as quickly as he could…

* *

It was after three PM when they left the hospital room.

They got into a cab in front of the hospital and headed for the nearest train station.

With a sigh of relief, Masamichi said, "Did they say she had a speech impediment? She didn't seem to have any difficulty speaking. Her words flowed smoothly, and her mind seemed super sharp. I guess you can't underestimate issues with the brain, but I'm glad she doesn't have any obvious symptoms."

"Huh. Were you chatting with her to check that? I thought you two had hit it off," Shino said, looking out the window.

"Not that much, but I thought she was nice and easygoing," Masamichi said with a wry smile. "And…when we were leaving? She said 'Thank you' in a soft voice. With your hearing, you couldn't have missed it."

Shino glanced at Masamichi and raised a brow by a few millimeters. "She was talking to you."

"No, she wasn't! She said that to you, Shino. She said it shyly because it embarrassed her, but she was touched. She said she never expected you to come rushing to see her."

"That's because it would be a hassle if she died…"

"But that isn't all, is it? You're both so stubborn."

"I am not being stubborn."

"Okay, okay."

Masamichi was acting haughty for a servant, but from his standpoint, both Chieko and Shino seemed like two children who couldn't patch things up between them.

"You're being an awfully bossy servant," Shino spat out with a grumpy look on his face, and his lips curved downward in a pout.

Ooh, he's unhappy.

Masamichi thought it hilarious that Shino sometimes acted this way, like a child.

It was probably silly to consider his more-than-a-thousand-year-old master *cute*, but he couldn't help feeling that way.

Still, it would be bad if he kept teasing Shino and made him seriously angry.

Masamichi carefully changed the subject.

"We're going home now, right? I hear the cakes and breads in Kobe are awesome, so I'd like to do a little shopping. Can we spare some time to do that?"

Shino then let out a small "Ah" and looked at him with a serious expression.

"Do you have anything that you have to do after this?"

"Me? Wait a sec."

Masamichi checked the calendar on his phone and looked at Shino.

"No, I don't. I have a class at my prep school, but it's basically self-studying, so I can skip it."

"Then we don't have to go straight home." He turned to the driver and said, "Take us…to Arima."

The middle-aged driver asked, "Arima…Arima Hot Springs, sir?"

Shino made eye contact with the man through the rearview mirror and nodded slightly.

Masamichi looked at Shino in surprise.

"Arima Hot Springs…? I've heard the name, but is it near here?"

The driver—not Shino—answered his question, still glancing in the rearview mirror.

"Sir, it's only thirty or forty minutes from here if the roads aren't congested."

"Th-thirty or forty minutes…?"

Having lived a humble life, Masamichi shuddered at the thought of what a long cab ride like that would cost, but Shino appeared unconcerned.

He told himself to calm down, since it would be rude to overtly worry about Shino's finances, nodded, and said, "I see," wearing a slightly tense smile.

"Would we be able to go to a day spa at this hour? Wouldn't it be tough, since their overnight guests would be checking in around

now? Maybe we could look for a public bathhouse…”

“Why do we need a day spa? We can spend the night there. You just said you didn’t have plans,” Shino said, sounding suspicious, and Masamichi’s round eyes widened.

“You mean we can stay at an inn? Well, I don’t have other plans, but…I didn’t come prepared to spend the night. You didn’t, either, did you?”

“It isn’t as if we’re going into uncharted territory. All we have to do is buy whatever we need, and the inn should have the bare necessities.”

“That’s true.”

“Sir, there are convenience stores in the hot springs area where you can buy almost anything you need,” the driver said, once again joining their conversation. “Oh, but…” He frowned.

“What is it?”

“It’s a weekday, but Arima Hot Springs is very popular, and the inns sell out fairly consistently. Do you know where you want to stay? You can call the tourist information center and secure accommodations…”

Masamichi reached for his phone after hearing the driver’s kind suggestion, but Shino gave the friendly driver a cold, blank stare—or rather, a look of irritation, with his brow furrowed. He then curtly mentioned the name of an inn.

Surprised, Masamichi stared at Shino’s profile, still holding his phone in his hand.

“Huh?! Did you already book us an inn? When did you do that?!”

Shino replied, still with a chilly tone, “I haven’t made a reservation. But go there.”

“Uh…yes, sir. But, sir…”

“What?”

The driver’s friendly attitude was gone, and this time, he spoke without daring to look in the rearview mirror.

“Uh, that inn has always been a kind of hidden getaway for bigwigs, and they don’t accept walk-in guests. Are you sure you

want to go there? You said you didn't have a reservation."

Huh?! Is that the type of place he's talking about? Even a specter can't go to an inn like that for VIPs…

As Masamichi fidgeted with worry, Shino said sharply to the driver, "I know that. Never mind, just go. Focus on your driving."

"Oh…y-yes, sir! I beg your pardon, sir! I'll take you there right away."

Shino didn't raise his voice, but when he got irritated, his voice became strong and sharp, like a whip.

Completely overwhelmed, the driver gripped the steering wheel more tightly than necessary and refrained from attempting to glance at the people in his back seat at all…

After driving through the city, the cab took a toll road and then meandered down a winding mountain road before finally arriving at the hot springs resort of Arima.

It was indeed an approximately forty-minute drive.

"This is the hot springs resort area," the driver said. "The inn is a little way out of town. Would you like to park here first and do some shopping…?"

"There's no need for you to be concerned. Take us to the inn."

Shino's instructions were brief, but the driver responded promptly, like a spirited racehorse, "Yes, sir!" and turned the wheel. "We're here, gentlemen."

The driver sounded far more respectful than when they'd flagged the cab, and the fare indicated on the meter was a little over seven thousand yen.

While Shino paid, Masamichi got out of the car, looked around, and sighed a little uneasily.

He had never seen an inn that better fit the driver's description of a *hidden getaway*.

The building was situated outside the resort area, along a narrow, winding mountain road. It was a small, one-story Japanese-style building surrounded by a dense grove of trees. It wasn't a

glamorous example of luxury, but rather simple and classic, with an elegant exterior.

The entrance had a porch where cabs could park.

An older male employee, dressed in an indigo-dyed *happi* coat, emerged from the entrance, looking suspicious as he approached Masamichi.

"Sir. Perhaps you've come to the wrong inn?"

He sounded polite, but Masamichi sensed a guarded and somewhat contemptuous tone in his voice, which suggested that *he wasn't suitable for this inn*.

"Oh…um. Uh…"

Masamichi was instantly flustered, but then Shino placed a hand on his shoulder. The hand guided him backward, and he was once again in a position behind Shino, where the specter's back guarded him.

"We have the right place. I'm sure of it. Is the manager here?"

The employee tried to respond politely, now more puzzled than alarmed.

"Yes, he is, but…we have no reservations today. Due to the need for preparations, our inn doesn't accept walk-in guests…"

"Never mind; just get me your manager. Here."

Shino pulled his card case out of his jacket's breast pocket and produced a single card. It had the name *Bougyoudou* and his name printed in letterpress on a thick piece of Japanese *washi* paper.

"Oh…u-um. All right, I shall take this. Please wait here for a moment. And please be sure to refrain from coming inside," the employee warned, despite accepting Shino's card respectfully with both hands and going inside the building.

"Shino, maybe it was a long shot trying to stay here. That man looked at us like we were totally out of place," Masamichi said, feeling uneasy.

The sun was beginning to set, casting the surroundings in the warm colors of the sunset. Once the sun disappeared below the horizon, darkness would likely shroud everything.

Shino would be okay with that, since he was a specter, but Masamichi shuddered to imagine the darkness.

But Shino looked about with a hint of nostalgia, then casually placed his hands in his pants pockets.

"The atmosphere hasn't changed, but the hot springs tourist area made me feel like I was in a foreign country."

"Huh?!" Masamichi responded, and he moved closer to Shino. "Have you been here before? And would that be during…the Heian period?"

Shino nodded, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Yeah. I came here a number of times, accompanying my master, Tokifuyu Tatsumi, when he came for hot spring therapy."

"Are you telling me that Arima's had hot spring facilities that long?"

To Masamichi's surprise, Shino spoke in a tone that suggested this was simply common sense.

"I don't know how much of it is true, but Tokifuyu said Oonamuchi no Mikoto and Sukunahiko na Mikoto were the ones who discovered the hot spring water here."

"A-are you talking about ancient gods? Hey, wait. Do gods soak in hot spring baths?!"

Masamichi became increasingly stunned, but Shino expressed his boredom by kicking the graveled ground with the tip of his shoe.

"I don't know, but I imagine that even God would take a dip in hot water."

"Is that how it is? Do other gods love taking baths, too?"

"I don't know. But as far as humans are concerned, I heard that Emperor Jomei and Emperor Koutoku also loved the hot springs here."

"…Those sound like names I vaguely recall from my Japanese history class. Wow. So people continue to soak in that same hot water today, huh?"

"I also heard the priest Gyouki rebuilt it after it became ruined."

"Gyouki? The man who built the Great Buddha in Nara?"

"Right. Sei Shounagon also wrote about Arima's hot springs in her work, *The Pillow Book*."

"Wow… That's like a parade of famous historical figures. It's amazing, making me a little dizzy. This is a historical hot springs resort, huh?"

Masamichi staggered, impressed by the glittering history of Arima Hot Springs and Shino's erudition. Then he saw the older employee come out of the building again, in a hurry this time, making him wonder if the man wouldn't fall.

Behind him was a man in a high-quality suit, almost as fine as the one Shino was wearing. He was walking more calmly but was clearly in a rush.

I wonder who he is.

"Mr. Tatsumi! I am terribly, terribly sorry!" he shouted in a hoarse voice as the older employee bowed deeply to Shino.

The man caught up to him, came over, and suddenly offered his hand to Shino.

"Mr. Tatsumi! Welcome!"

He had a bit of an accent. It made Masamichi curious, and then he saw that the man had chestnut-colored hair and beautiful green eyes.

He's a foreigner!

Oblivious to his surprised servant, Shino calmly approached the man.

"You said before that I could come anytime I wanted, that a first-class inn always had a room available for an important guest who suddenly showed up. I'm here to confirm that."

When the foreign-looking man heard that, his finely chiseled face wrinkled into a friendly smile.

"Yes, of course. And you, Mr. Tatsumi, are certainly an important guest. We always have a room for you," he said. Then he turned his attention to Masamichi. Shino gave him a brief introduction.

"This is Masamichi Adachi. He's my assistant."

"Oh, your assistant. Hello, I'm Henri Yoshida. How do you do, Mr. Adachi?" The man…Henri…introduced himself in fluent Japanese and shook hands firmly with Masamichi as well. "I'm from France. I married into the family that operates this inn and now serve as manager."

He sounded a little awkward here and there, but his linguistic skills were superb.

"Hello. Nice to meet you."

Masamichi's heart raced as he met another stranger, but Henri remained smiling and spread his arms wide.

"Mr. Tatsumi saved our inn. We owe its life—our lives—to him, and we welcome you, too. Please come in."

As if responding to Henri's words, several female employees in kimonos approached them, gently took their meager belongings, then invited them inside.

What am I going to do? Shino's wearing a suit, and he looks cool and regal, and of course, he belongs here. But I'm in my regular clothes for prep school, and I'm not classy. Oh, God… No matter how you look at it, I don't belong here. These people can't want me to stay here.

Masamichi had become a little familiar with first-class Western hotels when he was in London, but a Japanese-style inn was a different story.

He walked inside with a hunched back, embarrassed by his shabbiness.

There was a spacious earthen floor area at the entrance, where the aroma of tatami mats mingled with the scent of elegant incense. He took off his cheap sneakers, which the older employee promptly picked up and carried to the back.

He must have served as the traditional shoe-handler-slash-doorman.

Masamichi stepped into a pair of comfortable slippers and followed Shino across the green-tinged tatami mats—they were probably brand-new. As he did, he couldn't help feeling a mild sense

of concern that, like his London trip with Shino, this spur-of-the-moment trip wouldn’t be as simple as he might have imagined…

CHAPTER 3

Reminiscence and the Now

"Ooh, that hot water was amazing…"

Masamichi made his way through the curtains at the entrance to the large bathhouse and sighed, feeling content, fanning himself at the chest of his *yukata* kimono.

What the shoe-tending employee said earlier about the inn having no reservations for the day seemed to be a way to get rid of suspicious visitors (i.e., him and Shino).

There were several other guests in the large bathhouse, spending quiet time in the tiled indoor tub, the Japanese garden–style bath outside, and the cozy but authentic sauna, each in their way.

The bathhouse itself wasn't exactly as big as a swimming pool, since the inn itself was small. However, Masamichi could stretch out his arms and legs in the tub, and it was particularly invigorating to sit in the open-air bath with a view of the well-kept garden.

I'm still warm all over. No wonder. Shino said it was a hot spring bath the ancient gods found, after all.

Either the mineral-rich hot spring water was highly effective for health, or Masamichi got carried away and spent too long soaking in the tub, or maybe it was a combination of both. His whole body felt like it was on fire, and at this rate, he would be drenched in sweat despite bathing.

He looked around to see if he could at least find a fan, to cool off.

The large space in front of the bathing room seemed to be a rest area and a place to meet. It had benches, magnificent massage chairs that could easily pass for couches, and a bar that offered soft drinks free of charge.

A chic fan without wings was placed casually in front of a bench.

Gee, they think of everything.

Feeling happy, Masamichi went to the bar where a sign read, COMPLIMENTS OF OUR INN.

His eyes lit up when he saw the offerings: detox water; water infused with fruits, herbs, and vegetables; orange juice; green tea; carbonated drinks that appeared to be a local specialty; and even popsicles.

He took a milk-flavored popsicle without hesitation, adorned with a slice of strawberry on the side, which was very pretty.

He sat at the end of the bench, working his way around the massage chairs two older women were enjoying, so he wouldn't disturb them, enjoying the sweet, ice-cold popsicle while feeling the comforting breeze from the fan on his cheeks.

Come to think of it, this is a really high-class inn. I guess that's why they don't have the coffee-flavored milk you find everywhere that people could glug down.

As he had such thoughts, he cooled down internally, thanks to the popsicle, and externally via the fan, and he began feeling more and more comfortable.

Now in a better state of mind to appreciate his surroundings, Masamichi finally noticed that music was playing in the rest area.

The volume was subdued enough not to get in the way of people chatting, so he hadn't realized it until then.

Is it Japanese music…? It sounds like the dragon flute that Shino sometimes plays. Is it gagaku—traditional court music? I think it's the first time I've heard gagaku being played at a hot spring inn.

Masamichi was familiar with the typical gagaku piece called *etenraku*, which was often played at shrines. But the music he was now hearing was a combination of instruments like *hichiriki*, *ryuuteki*, and *shou*, which even an amateur like him could make out, with a completely different melody.

I don't know that song.

He carefully used his front teeth to scrape the last of his popsicle remaining on its stick, listened to the music in a daze, and happened to overhear the exchange between the two women in the massage chairs.

"Isn't Master Kagiroi performing?"

"Kagiroi?"

"You know, the super-hot gagaku performer everyone's talking about."

"Oh, a gagaku performer who's super hot? I didn't know there was one like that."

"He appears on TV now and then. This is an original piece of his. I'm sure of it. I know because I bought his CD."

"You sound like a dedicated fan."

Masamichi listened to the lazy conversation and tuned into the music himself.

No wonder it didn't sound familiar, if it was an original piece by a gagaku master.

Now that he'd heard a bit about it, it did sound like it had some modern elements in the tempo and melody, though that might be an amateur's shallow assumption.

"This Kagiroi—is he that wonderful, making you want to call him *master*?"

"He's fabulous. Sometimes, he dresses like a Heian nobleman, and sometimes, he wears a suit, but he's beautiful either way, like a Kabuki actor. The music is fabulous, too. Oh, boy, I wish I could go to his concert."

"Then go."

"I can't. I can't get a ticket. The tickets sell out in an instant. My husband's assistants have tried their best to get me a ticket, but it hasn't worked."

"Oh dear. How about through your husband's business connections? He must know many people."

"I've tried that, but he says it's impossible. The guest seats sell like hotcakes, too."

"Wow."

"He's totally amazing. His concerts are *fainting concerts*!"

"Oh my goodness."

What the heck? Fainting concerts? Does that mean he faints? Or the audience? Either way, it's dangerous. Fainting at a gagaku concert…? Could that really happen? It can't be because the music is intense. This Kagiroi person must be really hot.

Masamichi had finished eating his popsicle, which made him more and more tuned in to the women's conversation.

That was when a calm voice called out to him, "Mr. Adachi."

"Yes?! Oh! Um."

"Henri."

Henri Yoshida, the manager of the inn, was standing in front of Masamichi. He was the man who had graciously welcomed him and Shino when they suddenly showed up at the inn earlier in the evening.

He had taken off his jacket and was now wearing a happi coat with the inn's name and crest dyed into the fabric over his shirt and tie, just like that older man who handled guests' shoes.

He was a picture-perfect example of a blend of Japanese and Western styles. The styles matched strangely naturally and created a unique atmosphere.

"Thank you for hosting us."

Henri held out a hand to stop Masamichi from standing up on reflex.

"I hope you don't mind me joining you," he said as he sat beside him at a comfortable distance. "So, what do you think of our inn? Do you like it?"

Still red from the heat, Masamichi's face turned an even darker red.

"Everything is so nice, and I feel sorry for being so out of place. I didn't expect all the rooms to be individual units…"

"You thought at first that we were a small inn, didn't you?" Henri asked with amusement in his eyes, and Masamichi readily agreed.

"Uh-huh. I heard it was a hidden getaway and imagined it was a place that was limited to one party of guests a night or something."

"Yes, a hidden getaway is what we are. That's why each guest room is an individual villa. They all have a private bath and garden, so you can stay without seeing anyone if you wish to play hide-and-seek."

"I can see that. Our guest room is a lovely, authentic Japanese-style one-story house… I feel like I'm in an old film. If it weren't for the TV, the bed, and the audio setup, it really would be like stepping back in time."

Henri agreed, looking a little regretful.

"That it is. The beds are important, since we have guests with disabilities, but we really wanted to do without the TV, audio set, and Wi-Fi. But that would be an inconvenience to our guests. Japanese people aren't good at relaxing and doing nothing. It stresses them out to be at loose ends."

His curiosity piqued by what Henri was saying, Masamichi nodded.

"I think I understand what you're saying. I feel kind of restless when I have nothing to do, too."

"As a Frenchman, it's hard for me to understand that. But our guests can choose not to use these electronic devices if they don't need them. Still, I *have* placed the TV sets behind sets of double doors so they don't stand out," Henri said, chuckling. Then he gestured, as if he were opening those doors.

Despite his youthful smile, there was a fair mix of gray strands in his chestnut hair, and he had deep wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. Masamichi figured he was probably over forty.

"By the way, where is Mr. Tatsumi? Is he still taking a bath?"

Masamichi shook his head with a wry smile.

"No, Shino…I mean, Tatsumi doesn't like taking baths with other people and said he'd enjoy the hot spring water in our room," Masamichi explained, softening what Shino had said earlier: *"I am in no way inclined to bathe in the same water as a herd of humans."*

"I see. Mr. Tatsumi is surprisingly shy, is he? Well, he's *mystery*, so that may explain it."

"Mystery?"

"Oh, uh… I meant, *mysterious*."

After rephrasing his words with excellent Japanese pronunciation, Henri got on his feet to greet another male guest who had come to the main bath and politely bowed to see him off.

Then he sat down again and said in a somber tone, "It's truly thanks to Mr. Tatsumi that we can welcome guests to enjoy this inn."

Not wanting to miss the opportunity, Masamichi asked, "What do you mean? Did Tatsumi do something…um, mysterious…spiritual…? Like, uh, solve some incident to do with ghosts?"

Henri's eyes lit up.

"Precisely! No wonder you're his assistant. You know him well. But you weren't around five years ago. Mr. Tatsumi was alone then."

"Right. I started working for him this spring. May I ask what happened?"

Henri glanced at the female guests still lounging in the massage chairs and said in a low voice, "Would you care to take an evening walk with me?"

Apparently, it wasn't a story he wanted the other guests to hear. Masamichi agreed and left the bathhouse with Henri.

"It's dark outside in the garden, so let's take a stroll inside the inn. We only have three parties of guests staying with us today, including you and Mr. Tatsumi, so we should have some privacy."

Henri led Masamichi to the main building, the first area that Masamichi had stepped into earlier, with the front desk.

The front desk was no longer staffed, and a young male employee sat behind the counter in front of a computer, attending to paperwork.

He stood up as soon as he saw Henri and Masamichi. Henri said, "Something to drink, please," and then led Masamichi to a room one step lower, beside the front desk.

"Wow!" Masamichi exclaimed as soon as he set foot in the room.

It wasn’t particularly large—only about twelve tatami mats in size, but the ceiling was exhilaratingly high.

A medieval European-style chandelier hanging from the ceiling gave the room a very stately and chic atmosphere.

What surprised Masamichi the most was the large table in the center of the room, the variety of chairs around it, and the huge bookshelves that seemed to cover the entire wall area, along with a modern fireplace embedded in another wall.

“It’s a lovely room… Is it a library?”

“It’s a reading room. Good, no one’s here, as I expected. Please, take any chair you like.”

Prompted by Henri, Masamichi took his time mulling over which to choose and took the simple wooden chair near him.

“Oh, you like Hans J. Wegner’s chair. You have great taste. I’ll take this one here by Arne Jacobsen.”

Henri gave Masamichi a brief description of the chairs and then pulled out the chair next to Masamichi and sat down.

Rather than facing the table, he turned his body toward Masamichi, and Masamichi did the same.

“This inn burned down a long time ago. And it had been closed,” Henri said. Masamichi placed his hands on his lap and straightened his back.

“I was studying architecture in France and was a passionate fan of traditional Japanese wooden houses. I adored the pictures I’d seen of this inn, and when I came to Japan to study, I was shocked to see the burnt ruins. I couldn’t believe it.”

Masamichi’s soft expression clouded over as he imagined Henri in his youth, devastated by the pitiful appearance of the inn he’d dreamed about.

“That must have been tough.”

“Yes, it was. Later on, I met the granddaughter of the inn’s previous owner by chance. Her name is Mayu, and she’s now my wife.”

“What a coincidence!”

Henri snapped his fingers and winked.

"*Non*. I consider it our destiny. Mayu also loved the inn and wanted to restore it. We worked really hard, persuaded Mayu's father, who'd told us to give it up, built up our savings, collected and borrowed money, and finally rebuilt it five years ago."

Masamichi looked around and said, "No wonder," understanding the reason behind the place's beauty.

"I was wondering why everything looked so new—the facilities, the furniture, and the building itself—when it's a very relaxed and old-fashioned inn. I get it now."

Henri nodded, pleased that Masamichi understood what he was talking about.

"I'm glad you see it that way. That's what we wanted. It wasn't possible to reconstruct the inn to exactly match the way it was before. We couldn't find anyone with the expertise to build a structure like that anymore, nor the necessary wood."

"Oh… I see."

"But we aimed to create the same atmosphere. I did my best to make something that Mayu would find nostalgic. But strange things began happening when the construction started."

"Strange things?"

Masamichi had cocked his head curiously just as the young employee he'd seen earlier came into the room, placed a tea set on the table, bowed, and excused himself.

"Oh, this is nice. Please have some." Henri offered Masamichi a pale, golden drink with ice in a handmade, blown glass.

"Thank you."

With a slight bow, Masamichi took a sip of his drink.

"Oh."

It was mildly sweet and moderately tart. For Masamichi, it was a nostalgic flavor that he hadn't had in a long time.

"It's plum syrup and soda water, isn't it? My grandmother used to make it when she prepared her pickled plums every year. She used

fully ripened plums for pickling and young green plums that were still hard, for the syrup."

"Ah, you know about that. It's a favorite of mine, too." Henri picked up his glass, took a sip, and smiled. But the smile disappeared, as if he had wiped it away, when he set his glass back on the table. "So, what were we talking about? Ah, yes, the groundbreaking ceremony."

"Oh, that ritual people have with a Shinto priest present before they build a house…"

"That's right. When the priest arrived that day, the tent we'd prepared caught fire, although no one had been smoking."

"Huh…?"

"And once the construction got underway, the craftsmen said it was creepy. They talked about shadows of strangers wandering around the site, tools they'd placed in a certain spot moving somewhere else, and things they'd put in a safe place falling. Oh, and an eerie voice whispering '*koko*'—'here'—into their ears."

"*Koko*?"

Henri flashed him a mischievous smile.

"In my country, *koko* means 'coconuts' or 'cutie.' I wondered why the men were talking about coconuts or cute girls when someone told me that it meant '*here*' in Japanese."

"Ah," Masamichi said, nodding. "Yes, *koko* does mean 'here.'"

"Everyone said it wasn't a human voice. They said it was an apparition, a specter, a revenant, a phantom… I didn't believe it, but sure enough, I also heard the voice when I came to the site. Someone was saying '*koko*.' It was a soft voice, but I heard it so clearly that it gave me the creeps. I couldn't make out whether it was male or female."

Because Masamichi had also been gravely injured in a hit-and-run accident six months earlier and had been living with Shino since then, he was starting to feel that bizarre stories of the unknown were less horrifying than real human crimes.

In contrast to Henri, who was rubbing his arms in horror, Masamichi started to speak rather calmly.

"I see… And that's when you contacted Tatsumi?"

Henri nodded.

"Mayu discussed it with her father, who consulted a monk who frequented the inn when his father operated it. Then someone connected someone with someone else, and we received an introduction to Mr. Tatsumi."

"That's a long list of introductions…"

"Yes, connections are a funny thing. Mr. Tatsumi came here, walked around the grounds for a while, and then he stood in a corner and told us to dig in that spot. None of the construction workers were around that day, so Mayu and I began digging."

"Did you find something?"

"Please keep this to yourself," Henri said, and he looked Masamichi in the eye. After Masamichi nodded a few times, he said in a whisper, "Human bones. *Here*." Henri indicated his pelvic area.

"…!" Masamichi almost yelped in surprise and hastily covered his mouth with a hand. Then, like Henri, he asked in a whisper, "Wasn't that a big deal?"

Henri nodded.

"I immediately called the police. Mayu and I paled, thinking that a murder had taken place here. We thought our plan to rebuild the inn had come to an end—but we were wrong."

"Oh? Wasn't it a murder?"

"The police came to us later and said it was someone who'd been reported missing. The man had gone mountain climbing a decade ago and hadn't been heard from since. He must have gotten lost and died in the mountains, his body eaten by animals."

"…Oh…"

"Perhaps a wild dog had snatched the bone and buried it here so it could eat it later. The police succeeded in conducting DNA tests, and the deceased's family wrote us a thank-you letter, saying they were glad that their loved one had returned, even if it was just a

bone. It wasn't a bad incident, but I think some of our customers may be uncomfortable if they heard this…so, please…"

"I know. I won't tell anyone. So that's why you said Shino saved your inn."

Henri smiled.

"Precisely. Mr. Tatsumi may always look like he's annoyed with something, but he's really nice. Mayu and I were in shock when the bone was found, but he immediately said to us that we humans had come back to the site and finally dug up this person who had desperately wanted to be found. He told us not to worry, saying the person would only be grateful and wouldn't dream about haunting us. He said to be proud that we'd done a good deed and to go ahead and build our inn with pride."

Even five years ago, Shino, a specter, must have looked exactly the way he did today.

Masamichi could vividly picture him speaking those words with his usual disinterested expression and blunt delivery.

It sounds just like Shino…

"It was Mr. Tatsumi's words that supported us. We worked hard to rebuild the inn, and we have guests now who are happy to visit. Mayu is currently away studying hospitality, staying at inns in various countries to further refine our services."

"That…sounds lovely."

"Uh-huh. But Mr. Tatsumi had not once visited us since we finished building the inn, so I am genuinely happy that the two of you came here today." Henri put a hand on his chest and spoke like he meant every word from his heart. Then he looked at Masamichi with kind eyes. "I'm also happy that he now has you as an assistant. Five years ago, he came alone and left alone. It seemed to me that he hadn't enjoyed anything in a long time. I know I should mind my own business, but he was smiling a little when I took your meal to your room. I was so glad to see that."

"Oh, um."

Although Masamichi had cooled off completely from his hot bath, his face instantly turned bright red.

There was a reason why Shino had smiled during dinner. Masamichi was completely unfamiliar with table manners when it came to authentic kaiseki cuisine. Despite being alone with Shino in their villa, he had tensed up when he saw the delicacies set on the table.

"Don't keep dropping your food. Food is food, no matter where you eat what. There is no need to be so nervous," Shino had said.

Masamichi was as clumsy with his chopsticks as a young child, and Shino couldn't help laughing. That was when Henri brought them the main course, a sukiyaki dish of Sanda beef.

"That…was just Shino laughing at how clumsy I am."

But Henri calmly denied that.

"That's not true. Mr. Tatsumi definitely looked happy to me."

"He did?"

"No one wants to have a meal with someone they don't like. Mr. Tatsumi clearly looked like he was enjoying his dinner with you. I've seen many customers, and I can usually tell the relationships between people by the atmosphere in the room. The two of you are very comfortable with each other."

"Comfortable…"

Masamichi was at a loss for words. *Comfortable* was the furthest thing from what Shino was to him.

Despite Masamichi's thoughts, Henri deepened his smile, as if he was rather enjoying himself.

"Yes, comfortable. Mr. Adachi, I want you to enjoy your stay at our inn. Tomorrow morning, we'll be serving rice cooked in a *kamado*—a traditional Japanese oven with firewood. I guarantee that the rice will be lustrous and sparkling. Oh, and it's also lovely to watch the moon, the stars, and the break of day from the bath. Please do enjoy your stay with Mr. Tatsumi." Offering Masamichi his heartfelt wishes for a lovely stay, Henri added, "Oh, and of course, you can enjoy the use of this room as well. Relax, and have fun."

With that, he stood up and left the room.

It was suddenly silent, and Masamichi leaned back in his chair.

He wasn't used to wearing yukata kimonos, but Henri had carefully chosen it with his foreign eye. It was innovative—a yukata made of soft jersey fabric with a snap button where a typical yukata came undone, which made it very comfortable.

First, Chieko shared stories with me about Shino today, and now, Henri. These were stories I hadn't heard before, Masamichi thought as he lazily sipped his delicious plum soda.

He had only heard about Shino's past from the specter himself.

But today, Masamichi had heard stories from others' objective points of view, and he was surprised by how happy it made him.

Not that it meant he could understand Shino's true nature. Chieko and Henri had only seen *a small part* of the specter that had lived for more than a thousand years.

Still, Masamichi smiled, feeling as if he had managed to put together just a few pieces of the giant jigsaw puzzle that was Shino.

"I hope I can get to know more about Shino, a little at a time, like this. I'd really like to hear about his master, Tokifuyu…but that just isn't possible."

Masamichi was amused at himself for wishing for something he couldn't have. He finished his plum soda and got up to return to his room.

That was when a cool breeze kissed his cheek.

"Hmm?"

He looked around, figuring there was a fan somewhere nearby, but couldn't spot one.

Was it the air conditioner? But they shouldn't need it, since Arima is on top of a mountain, and it's much cooler than the city.

He was curious, but that was the only time he felt a breeze.

"Maybe I imagined it. Oh well. I'm going to go back to my room. Shino's probably finished bathing by now."

Shino had told him to spend his time as he pleased, but as a servant, he felt guilty about leaving his master alone indefinitely.

If Shino looks like he wants to be alone, then I'll come back here and read a book.

Perhaps Henri had told him about this room as a place to escape, thinking the same thing.

Grateful for his thoughtfulness, Masamichi took his glass back to the front desk with words of appreciation and headed back to his villa.

"I'm back. I'm sorry it took me a while… Oh? Isn't he here?"

Masamichi crept into the room, expecting Shino to be annoyed with him for wandering around who knew where, but his master wasn't in the large area that served as the living room.

He checked the bedroom which was separated from the living room by a sliding paper door, but Shino wasn't there, either, and there was no sign of the bed being used.

"I wonder if he went for a walk."

As a specter, Shino wouldn't be afraid of the dense darkness that enveloped the inn. *Or…*, Masamichi thought, when he heard the faint sound of water splashing.

"Oh! Is he still soaking in the tub…?"

He returned to the living room, opened the sliding door that led to the porch, and gasped.

Because through the window, he saw Shino…Shino's naked back.

Henri must have arranged it when he rebuilt the inn. Beyond the blurred privacy glass, which was seldom seen these days, there was a cypress bathtub. It was much smaller than the one in the main bathhouse but was still magnificent, allowing guests to enjoy the hot spring water in a semi-open-air bath.

Like the bathhouse, it was surrounded by beautifully maintained plants, and although it didn't come with a panoramic view, you could enjoy the sense of being in the forest.

The only lights were the thin crescent moon in the night sky and soft lights coming from the lanterns placed around the water, which

made Shino's pale body stand out in the darkness as he sat on the edge of the tub.

"Wow…"

Masamichi exhaled. His voice could be described as neither surprised nor admiring.

It was a scene out of a painting.

The drops of water dripping from his wet hair, the beauty of the chin that was turned up to watch the night sky, the slender nape, and the line from his back to his waist, still ramrod-straight, even while relaxing in this way.

The porcelain-smooth skin had not a single blemish, and there wasn't a trace of unneeded flesh on the body.

Although Masamichi knew it was *a temporary vessel* created by a spiritual medium, the sheer beauty of Shino's body instantly captured his eyes and his heart.

He's…so beautiful. Too beautiful to be real. This is like a dream.

As Masamichi gazed at him with rapt attention, Shino quietly slipped into the tub and submerged himself in the hot water up to the top of his head.

"…!"

The movements were as smooth as a mermaid's. Masamichi held his breath for a few seconds, maybe longer, without realizing it.

Unlike the quiet way he slid into the hot water, Shino surfaced loudly and shook his head vigorously.

The water that sprayed in all directions from the tips of his hair reminded Masamichi of a big dog playing in the water.

Smiling at the beautiful yet somewhat humorous movements, Masamichi gasped when he realized what he was doing.

Hold on a minute. I'm acting like a Peeping Tom. I don't know if specters have a concept of sexual harassment like us humans, but watching him like this without him knowing is out of the question for me.

Masamichi panicked as he tried to close the door at the same time that Shino turned toward him.

The specter's sharp gaze caught his eyes straight on. He couldn't have *just noticed* he'd been watching him.

He knew what I was doing!

Shino lifted his chin slightly, beckoning for Masamichi to go over to him, and he did so with great trepidation.

"I…I'm sorry. I didn't mean to peek! I came back from my bath, and I was looking for you, wondering where you were, and…I ended up standing here."

Masamichi apologized as he approached the bathtub, and Shino brushed back his wet hair with his hands, wiped his face, and looked at him suspiciously.

"Peeping? Did you think you were spying on me? You fool. How could I not notice your presence?"

"Oh…y-yeah. Right."

That meant Shino had allowed him to watch him…, Masamichi thought with relief and amazement as he sat near the tub on the porch, as Shino's gaze commanded.

"The, um…bathhouse wasn't too crowded. It was spacious and very nice."

"Hmph."

With a look of complete disinterest, Shino slipped into the hot water up to his chest and played with the water's surface with his fingertips.

The hot spring water was crystal clear, and Masamichi felt nervous, having a close-up view of Shino's naked body.

Or, to put it bluntly, his fake body.

But it moved at Shino's will, supple and powerful, and didn't look anything like *a temporary vessel*.

Still, his body was so perfect that it looked surreal, and Masamichi couldn't help looking down and away toward the lower part of the specter's body.

He said before…to let him take me to bed, so I imagined he'd have a penis…but does he really?

He didn’t have a clear view, because it was in the shimmering hot water, but it was definitely more magnificent than his own, and his thoughts went to Tokifuyu Tatsumi, Shino’s late master.

If the body he gave Shino was only a “temporary vessel” to contain the soul of a specter, then I don’t think he had to make every detail of his body this humanlike. I wonder if Tokifuyu had some other intention in mind.

As Masamichi considered such thoughts in a daze, Shino said in a rough tone, “Hey. Peeping on me wasn’t enough for you, and now you’re rudely ogling your master’s body?”

“Oh! Aaahh, I’m sorry! I couldn’t help it.”

“Help what?”

“I’m curious… Oh, I mean, of course, you look great when you’re wearing clothes, but I’m stunned by how beautiful you are without them.”

Masamichi apologized and made an excuse simultaneously, and with nothing else to do, he reached for the yukata that Shino had taken off.

He folded it more carefully than necessary and checked the look on Shino’s face, making an effort not to stare at his body.

Despite his disapproval, Shino didn’t seem particularly embarrassed or against having Masamichi see his naked body and continued to stretch out his arms and legs comfortably in the hot water.

“Uh… How long have you been sitting in that bath?” Masamichi asked, desperate to fill the awkward silence.

“Since right after you went to the big bath. I was bored.”

“And you’ve been soaking all this time? Oh, maybe a specter doesn’t get heatstroke.”

“I am not one to be outdone by a hot spring bath. Tokifuyu often said he got too greedy trying to soak in a bath for too long and would end up stretched out on the floor, but instead of correcting his ways, he kept doing the same thing.”

Masamichi's jet-black eyes sparkled as he neatly folded Shino's yukata and listened to his casual mention of days past.

"Oh, yeah, you said before that you'd been to Arima Hot Springs with Tokifuyu for his hot water therapy. What were hot springs like back then? I bet it was very different from what they're like today."

Then Shino suddenly used his fingers to splash hot water on Masamichi's face.

"Whoa!"

He grinned at Masamichi as he quickly wiped his forehead and cheeks.

"People reacted the same way then as you just did."

"…Shino… Did you play pranks on your master like this?"

"I did intentionally, since he never seemed to get tired of soaking in the hot water day in and day out, but Tokifuyu did seem annoyed."

"Of course he'd be annoyed! It's one thing to want to soak your body in hot water and another to have it splashed at you when you least expect it."

"That's what he said, too, pouting angrily. Ah…this is the spot."

"Huh?!"

Shino looked up at the crescent moon, contoured so thinly that it looked like a piece of thread shining weakly in the night sky, and continued, as if speaking to himself, "This, indeed, is where the inn Tokifuyu used to visit was located. It was a crude building, nothing like this inn."

"Is this really the same place where you came with him? The spot where you're soaking in the hot water? Is that where Tokifuyu bathed?"

"Yeah."

Shino nodded and looked at Masamichi. The next moment, Masamichi felt the warmth of the hot water with his whole body.

With blinding speed, Shino grabbed the front of Masamichi's yukata and dragged him into the tub.

"Huh? Wh-what the…?!"

Unable to understand what had just happened, Masamichi blinked. He was immersed in the hot spring in a strange position, still in his yukata, coughing after swallowing the water.

The tub may have been large enough for two adults, but Shino had his arms and legs stretched out, and as his servant, Masamichi only had a limited amount of space to himself.

"H-hey, Shino, what do you think you're doing? At least give me time to take off my yukata…"

Shino watched Masamichi with amusement as he complained. Of course, there was not a shred of guilt in his expression.

"More and more interesting. You complain the same way as Tokifuyu did."

"Wait a minute. This is nothing like splashing water on a person! Seriously, Tokifuyu had it tough with you… God, Shino, you really were a naughty child, weren't you? You're still… I mean, you aren't a child anymore, but you're certainly still full of mischief."

Masamichi sighed and looked down at his body resentfully.

He had once gone into a heated swimming pool with his clothes on during a water safety training class during elementary school, but this was the first time he had gone into a hot spring bath while clad in a yukata.

The yukata's design, with its large spaces at the cuffs and at the base of the arms, allowed little resistance against the water as he moved. As for his legs, the kimono's hem fluttered away from his body, offering virtually unrestricted movement.

The jersey fabric would probably be heavy after absorbing the water and a hassle when he got out of the tub. However, Masamichi was surprised that it wasn't as uncomfortable as he might have thought in the water.

"So this is how you took hot spring baths with Tokifuyu. You were remembering those days, huh?"

"Not that I have any emotional attachment to them. I was recalling old memories. That's all."

Shino was going out of his way to say that, which was as good as telling Masamichi that he was fondly reminiscing. Despite his intelligence, he seemed oblivious to such things, and although Masamichi knew it was disrespectful as his servant, he couldn't help thinking that it was *cute*.

"…I see."

"The hot springs in Arima where Tokifuyu used to bathe weren't as magnificent as they are here. They were simple baths: holes dug in the ground, filled with small rocks."

"Really? We still have wild rock baths today…"

"The facilities for nobles may have been more luxurious, but Tokifuyu probably couldn't afford them. Hot water therapy in those days often meant pouring hot water over the parts of the body that were unwell or soaking them in a bath…but Tokifuyu said it was quicker to immerse the entire body in hot spring water."

"Oh, I can imagine that. Tokifuyu must have been a very rational thinker. The reason why he made you his servant was like that, too. Instead of just killing you, it was better to make you a specter that was useful to humans."

"That's not rational thinking. It's being selfish."

Masamichi quickly changed the subject as Shino sounded like his mood was turning sour.

"B-but then again, people's butts would hurt in a bath filled with rocks."

"That's why…he soaked like this," Shino said as he grabbed Masamichi's arm.

"Huh?!"

Aided by the buoyancy of the water, Masamichi's body floated easily and fell straight into Shino's arms, as if that route had been predetermined.

This is a bridal carry.

Like an infant, Masamichi sat on Shino's lap, and he blushed in embarrassment.

"He wore a bath gown in the same way you're wearing that yukata, looked totally nonchalant, and used me as a chair when he bathed."

"Heh-heh!"

"It isn't funny. I was very annoyed by the rough treatment he gave me."

Shino looked grumpy, but his hands naturally fell around Masamichi's waist. More than a thousand years ago, he must have been ordered by his master to support his body like that.

Tokifuyu must have found Shino adorable.

Considering that, Masamichi couldn't understand why Tokifuyu eventually betrayed him, as Shino said, and sealed him in a jar.

While Shino was angry and resentful about it, he also couldn't stop reminiscing about his distant memories with his master. Perhaps Shino himself couldn't understand the reasons for Tokifuyu's actions and couldn't quite hate him for them.

Shino still loves Tokifuyu, and that's clear when I hear him talking about their memories together. That has to be why it's painful and sad for him.

Shino said he didn't have the same emotions as humans did, but Masamichi didn't agree.

After spending six months with him, Masamichi knew he had a wealth of emotions and went out of his way to suppress them. Of course, there were many subtleties of the human heart that he couldn't understand, but he still respected them, in his way.

Tokifuyu had probably nurtured part of his *human* spirit.

I really wish I could have met Tokifuyu and talked to him. He could have told me how to get along with Shino better, and I would have deepened my understanding of him.

Then Masamichi felt Shino grab his head with his large hand.

"Wh-what is it, Shino? It doesn't hurt, but it's a little scary when you suddenly reach from above."

"Shut up. Don't complain about everything your master does."

With that, Shino pushed Masamichi's head against his bare chest. Naturally, the younger man's back ended up resting against Shino's body.

However finely crafted it was, Shino's body didn't have body heat.

Masamichi's heart skipped a beat when the usually stone-cold body, warmed by the heat of the hot spring bath, felt like real human skin.

"Sh-Shino?"

"Tokifuyu always leaned on me like this and talked about a lot of nonsense. He would always get carried away and talk too much…"

"And that's why he got heatstroke?"

"Yeah. It was also my job to fan him as he stretched out slovenly on the floor… Naturally, I'm not going to do something like that for you."

"I'm your servant, not your master. I'm the one who has to fan you."

Masamichi chuckled and relaxed his tense body.

Feeling as if he, too, shared memories of Tokifuyu, whom he had never even met, he said, "I'd better get out of the water, since I also tend to get heatstroke pretty easily. Let's go buy some ice cream while the store is still open. I got a popsicle after my bath earlier, and it was really good. Let me treat you to that much if they sell the same kind."

He laughed out loud when Shino instantly replied, "You'll have to wait a hundred—no, a thousand years—till you're mature enough to treat me."

That night, as they lay side by side…though all they did was slip into their respective beds, Masamichi fought against his drowsiness and asked Shino, "Did you sleep side by side with Tokifuyu, too, when you came here with him?"

Shino's answer was clear indeed.

"I told him to let me do what I wanted while he slept and went up on a large tree branch outside. Tokifuyu recommended that I catch and eat weak specters that lurked in the area, saying it would make the neighborhood safer.

"Oh… Like specter mealtime?"

"Well, only to the point that I could keep him safe."

"That's so disciplined of you, Shino. So, you enjoyed your trips to hot springs, too, huh? Is that why…because it's a place filled with memories, you agreed to accept Henri's request?"

Masamichi waited for a beat, but Shino didn't respond.

The lack of a response spoke louder than words.

So, rather than push him further on the subject, Masamichi asked him another question.

"What do you want to do tomorrow? Get up in the morning, have breakfast, check out…and go home?"

"No," Shino said, clearly rejecting the idea. "We've come all the way here to Arima. I'm thinking of stopping by the capital…I mean, Kyoto, on our way back."

"Kyoto! Wow, I haven't been there since a high school field trip. That would be great. Oh, right, you used to live there."

"Yeah."

A lot of mixed feelings seemed to be condensed in Shino's short reply, and Masamichi hesitated for a while before working up the nerve to ask, "The place you used to live…where Tokifuyu's house used to be? Do you want to go and see it? I'll go with you. I mean, please, let me go with you. I'll try not to get in your way."

"…It will depend on how I feel tomorrow," Shino said carelessly, then turned his back to Masamichi.

It was a clear statement of intent that said he didn't want to continue the conversation. As his servant, Masamichi couldn't keep bothering him further.

Masamichi obliged, withdrawing as he said, "Okay. Goodnight." Shino's back remained still, and Masamichi couldn't hear a word from him, nor the sound of his breathing.

No longer concerned with Shino’s habitual behavior, Masamichi prayed that Shino would feel like visiting the site of his old home and closed his eyes, letting the pleasant exhaustion from the day take over.

CHAPTER 4

The Land of Cause and Effect

"If you take the new rapid train line from this station, you'll find that Kyoto is surprisingly close," Henri said.

After Shino and Masamichi ate breakfast, the inn manager drove them in what appeared to be his personal Mercedes-Benz to the nearest train station instead of having them take the inn's shuttle bus. "Please come back and stay with us again soon. The two of you will always be welcome. Oh, but if you can book in advance, we'll prepare a special feast for you!"

The nearby train station wasn't particularly close. They drove for about half an hour—down a winding mountain road, entering a long tunnel, and passing by an observatory with a spectacular view, particularly at night, that was used for TV filming.

Hearing that they were going to Kyoto, he must have chosen the station with the best access to get there.

Shino quickly got out of the car, saying only, "I'll be back." Masamichi heartily thanked their host to make up for it, and parted ways with Henri.

After watching the car until it turned left at an intersection and was no longer visible, he turned around and found that Shino was nowhere in sight.

"Yikes!"

Masamichi panicked for a moment, but fortunately, he could see the stairs to the platform in front of him and was almost certain that Shino had gone upstairs.

Knowing Shino, he is likely to say something like, "You know we're going to Kyoto. Surely, you can get there by yourself, get on a

train, and take off." Yep, he'd do that for sure.

Masamichi had no idea how often the "new rapid train" came, but he thought he had to catch up with Shino soon so he wouldn't be left behind.

"Geez. Shino was so aloof back there after Henri had been so nice and hospitable to us."

Quietly muttering complaints to himself, Masamichi rushed up the steps on the unexpectedly long staircase at full speed…

Fortunately, Masamichi made it and stepped onto the platform where the trains for Kyoto, bound for Shiga, arrived and departed. Then he found Shino sitting comfortably on the bench in front of him.

"Thank God you're here! I thought you were going to leave me behind. You should have waited for me."

"Fool. What kind of master matches his strides to his servant's?"

"I get that, but the least you could have done was thank Henri…"

Masamichi knew it was useless, but he complained to Shino anyway as he sat next to him. Then he took a towel out of his bag and wiped the faint sweat off his forehead.

"It was chilly when I woke up this morning, but it's still a little hot down here compared to the mountains."

It seemed that specters didn't feel hot or cold, and Shino rarely responded to Masamichi's comments about the weather. Still, he appeared to be in a good mood that morning, and he gazed at the platform on the other side of the tracks and said, "Tokifuyu often said that, too. He said Arima was nice and cool, unlike the hot and humid capital. He said he'd like to live there if he didn't have his duties."

Masamichi loved hearing Shino's stories about Tokifuyu, and he smiled instantly, his eyes lighting up.

"Really? I often hear that Kyoto is hot and humid, but I guess it's always been that way."

"It's a matter of topography. Whether past or present, that should be the same. Because he was sensitive to the cold, he was grateful for the hot water, saying it loosened up his body, not that I understand that feeling."

"You don't understand it? But, Shino, you were soaking in the hot spring water in the bath in our room last night and this morning. Wasn't that because the hot water felt good? I thought specters were healed by hot springs just like we are."

Shino looked exasperated and raised a brow.

"That's foolish. Unlike humans, I don't have aches and pains in my joints. Just because I soak in hot water doesn't mean some part of me will be healed."

"Okay, if you put it that way. But you looked like you were enjoying yourself when you were in that tub, plunging yourself underwater."

Wisely, Masamichi swallowed the words "like a child playing in a swimming pool." Still, he couldn't help pursuing the matter. The image of Shino that he'd seen the previous night had been out-of-this-world beautiful, yet he had also looked alive, like a fish at sea.

Shino then retorted curtly.

"For me, bathing in hot spring water is like eating a meal. The power of *the dragon's vein* resides in the hot water at Arima. By bathing in it, I gain a little, however slight, mystical power.

"'The dragon's vein'?"

Although Shino looked exasperated by Masamichi's confusion, he demonstrated his usual conscientious manner and started to explain in a minimal number of words.

"Tokifuyu said that in various parts of the world, there are prosperous lands that have dragon holes where the chi energy of the Earth erupts. We call the paths for that chi 'dragon's veins.'"

Since meeting Shino, Masamichi has had many opportunities to encounter such talk, which fell under the category often called *spirituality*. He had become completely accustomed to it, but the scale they were discussing was so huge that it made him dizzy.

"Um… So it's like the whole world is connected by energy under the ground?"

Shino blinked in surprise.

"That was wise for a fool like you. Yeah, that's right. If we were to compare the Earth to the human body, the dragon's veins are like blood vessels.

"Ah!" Masamichi clapped once in understanding.

"I really get it. The Earth's energy travels around through these underground dragon veins, just like the blood vessels you see under your skin. Are these dragon holes like what we call pressure points in acupuncture? Those places where it feels good when you press them, that can give you energy…?"

Masamichi thought Shino would scold him for blabbing about his imagination and making light of what he'd told him, but the specter nodded with a straight face.

"You may not be far off the mark," he said. "That's not a bad interpretation. Water from hot springs touches the dragon's veins underground and contains a bit of the chi…the powers of the Earth. That's why humans have favored hot springs since ancient times. Of course, hot springs aren't a panacea, but when used well, they can help heal wounds and illnesses, giving people strength when their life force is dwindling."

"I see…! I've always wondered why my parents and grandparents loved hot springs. I couldn't understand why they would go to a day spa when we had baths at home. I suppose there might be reasons beyond just the comfort of soaking in a big bath. I usually avoid hot springs because I tend to get heatstroke if I soak for too long. Last night, I got into the water twice in a row, and I got so hot that my heart started pounding, and I felt dizzy."

Shino grinned wickedly.

"That's because your body is fragile. A weak vessel cannot hold much. That's all there is to it."

"Ngh. Yeah, I guess so. But you're the one who dragged me into my second bath last night! That was completely unplanned, and I

was still in my yukata, making it even worse…”

“Is that your excuse for stretching out on your back as soon as you got out of the hot tub and sending me, your master, out to fetch you a sports drink and ice cream?”

“Ngh! Y-you’re right about that. I’m really sorry I sent you, my master, out on an errand.”

Masamichi apologized sincerely, and Shino had just started to say something when an announcement rang out on the platform that a train was approaching.

Masamichi got on his feet with a relieved look on his face.

“Hey, here comes the train. I hope we can find seats, since it should take some time to get to Kyoto.”

“I don’t care either way,” Shino said without interest, and he stood up.

Shino’s movements were always quick, but they were even sharper than usual.

Maybe even a specter gets excited about going someplace he lived in the past.

Although Shino seemed to have mixed feelings about his late master, Kyoto was still his hometown, where he came into this world as a specter more than a thousand years ago.

Masamichi boarded the train after Shino, envying the specter’s unique experience—something no human could ever imagine. It had to be fascinating to compare the scenery then and now.

As expected, the train was pretty packed with commuters and students heading for school. But a large bulk of them soon got off at Osaka Station, and the two managed to secure seats alongside each other.

Shino sat by the window, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He looked out at the scenery in silence until the train arrived at Kyoto Station.

For Masamichi, the half hour to Kyoto seemed to melt away as he gazed at Shino’s handsome profile, and he got off the train feeling as

if he were possessed.

Shino's steps exuded confidence, as if he were taking a stroll back home.

"Have you been to Kyoto since you left that jar and became a free man?"

"Several times," he said clearly.

"Oh, I see. Then you've already seen things here and are familiar with modern-day Kyoto?"

"Not really. I've visited this place several times for business and antique transactions, but I've always gone straight home afterward. I've had meals but haven't done much more than that."

"Oh, you've been here on business. With Daizou?"

"Yes. Daizou said if we were to go out on the town, it would be when we brought Yoriko with us, though she said not to worry about it and to go out and have a little fun."

"They were really close, weren't they…? Hey, Shino, you're going too fast!"

Even in the crowded corridor leading to the ticket gates at Kyoto Station, Shino walked briskly with long strides, leveraging his long legs and maneuvering through the crowds with surprising agility.

"You're slow. You don't want to stay in a crowded place like this for long, do you? Now, walk faster."

"I'm doing my best. If I lose you here, we may seriously be separated for life… Whoa!"

Masamichi couldn't help exclaiming in surprise.

Shino suddenly reached out and grabbed Masamichi by the wrist, shirtsleeve and all.

"Sh-Shino."

"I've caught you. I'm not interested in looking for a stray servant."

Oblivious to Masamichi's concern about how other people saw them, Shino kept a painfully firm grip on his wrist and continued walking even faster.

"I'm going to trip."

If he really did fall, he wouldn't only have Shino clucking his tongue at him. He was likely to get other people involved.

Determined not to injure others, Masamichi made a desperate effort to keep moving his feet and was genuinely relieved when they reached the last long escalator leading to the main exit.

Shino was standing right in front of him, still holding his wrist. He'd probably be offended if Masamichi asked him to let go, and it was too late to start worrying about other people watching them.

Never mind me, but Shino stands out wherever he is.

Even as they rode the escalator that slowly descended, Masamichi heard female voices whispering behind him:

"I think I've seen that guy before. Is he a musician? A model? An actor?"

"Look at him, holding hands with his agent. Is he a foreign actor, maybe?"

It appeared to strangers that Shino looked like a star and that Masamichi was his agent. They were really a master and his servant, but since that wasn't a common relationship, Masamichi didn't think they were too far off the mark.

Masamichi was shy by nature, but since he'd begun living with Shino, he had experienced a wealth of surprises and things that had confused him, and it had made him stronger and quick to stand his ground.

Quietly, he tried to catch his breath while they took the escalator. He was taking deep breaths when he caught sight of a large poster by the ticket gate they were headed for.

A young man dressed in what appeared to be Heian attire stood with a small flute pressed to his lips—probably a hichiriki, a double-reed instrument—against the backdrop of a solemn shrine at night.

He looked fabulously mysterious, standing in front of a torii gate, bathed in a white spotlight.

O-oh. Could that be…?

Masamichi recalled the conversation he'd heard between the two women outside the large bath the evening before.

Could the man in that poster be the popular gagaku musician they were talking about? He sure looks cool, though I can't quite make out his face.

Masamichi's guess was right on the money.

As the escalator approached the ground level, the poster became more visible. There were bold letters toward the top that read, THE TALK OF THE TOWN! THE NOBLEMAN OF GAGAKU IS FINALLY APPEARING IN THE ANCIENT CAPITAL!

I was right. Hmm, so the man's coming to Kyoto. Oh, but tickets are already sold out… Wow, he must really be popular.

Masamichi nodded in admiration when he noticed a SOLD OUT sticker at the bottom of the poster, where the details seemed to be printed.

He wanted to examine it more closely, but the escalator continued its descent and took him and Shino to the ground level.

Shino pulled his hand as vigorously as ever and headed for the ticket gate.

"Aaahh…"

He had no choice but to proceed with painful reluctance, but he couldn't exactly demand his master to stop so they could look at the poster.

Masamichi walked on ruefully but still obediently, checking inside his bag with his free left hand to pull out his prepaid card…

About thirty minutes later, the two were standing in a taxi queue outside Kyoto Station.

Not that they had been waiting in line for half an hour after exiting the ticket gate.

Perhaps because it was a weekday, there weren't that many people waiting for taxis.

But before joining the line, Shino had insisted on stopping at a department store in front of the train station.

"Is there something you want to buy?" Masamichi asked curiously.

"I'm buying clothes," Shino immediately replied.

Masamichi had assumed that they'd spend half a day in Kyoto and head home in the evening, but it appeared that Shino planned to stay another night.

"Staying in this suit all this time gives me what humans call *stiff shoulders*. I'll buy you an outfit while we're at it. Humans are creatures that give off a foul stench when they continue to wear the same clothes."

With these irrefutable statements, Shino headed for the men's floor, quickly picking out something for himself and also for Masamichi.

Masamichi was appalled by how efficiently Shino took him to the employee changing room, where they put on their new clothes and then asked a clerk to pack what they'd been wearing in paper bags and ship them home.

"We can pick up underwear at a convenience store before we go to an inn," he said as they waited for a cab. He was dressed in a cardigan over a cut-and-sewn top and dark gray tapered pants.

"Oh, okay. That'll be fine. Um…thanks for buying me these clothes."

"It's my responsibility as your master."

"Maybe that's true, but you even picked them out for me," Masamichi said, humbled.

Shino replied, "Left to your own devices, you'd be too shy to buy something decent, and you'd pick nothing but cheap items. It's quicker for me to choose. Do you have something against that?"

Masamichi frantically shook his head.

"Not at all! This is super easy to move around in, and it's perfect for the weather we're having. I wanted to get changed, so it feels great. It's just that…"

"What?"

"Oh, never mind. Thank you so much," Masamichi said with a pained smile.

We bought our clothes at the same shop, so they…sort of match.

That was the reason for the troubled look that had been on Masamichi's face since he'd put on his new clothes.

Of course, Shino wouldn't have intended to wear matching outfits—the kind that family members or couples would coordinate. But it was still possible that he could have been biased in terms of taste.

Masamichi's chinos were a very similar shade to Shino's pants. The plaid flannel shirt he wore over his T-shirt had the same blue color as Shino's cardigan.

I know I'm reading too much into this, and he bought everything at the same store because it was too much trouble to shop elsewhere, but our clothes sort of match in a mysterious way. But, oh well, it isn't as if we're wearing matching couples' shirts or anything.

As Masamichi's gaze darted between his and Shino's outfits to compare them, it was finally their turn to get into a cab.

There were more and more cars, similar to taxis in London, at Kyoto Station. The one that automatically opened its rear door for them was an old-fashioned sedan.

Shino got in first and briefly told the driver to take them to *Modoribashi*.

The young driver looked a little doubtful. "Modoribashi? Oh, Ichijou Modoribashi. Yes, sir."

Masamichi got into the car next to Shino, and the cab took off once they fastened their seat belts.

"So, you're going to Ichijou Modoribashi. Are you a fan of Abe no Seimei? That's unusual; his fans who go there are usually women."

Shino didn't respond at all, so Masamichi responded to the driver without understanding what he was talking about.

"Abe no Seimei…? Ichijou Modoribashi?"

"I'm sorry, was I mistaken? Are you unfamiliar with the subject?"

"Oh, um, Abe no Seimei was a famous spiritual medium, wasn't he? I saw a film about him."

Apparently, the driver had begun to wonder what was going on with them, because he now looked relieved as he nodded into the

rearview mirror.

"Yes, that's right. Seimei Shrine was built on the site of the former residence of Abe no Seimei. Female worshippers have been frequenting the shrine for several decades, influenced by manga and TV dramas. It used to be a quiet and lonely shrine, but it's magnificent now."

"Ah… It must be very popular."

"That it is. I don't know about the real Abe no Seimei, but he's depicted as a really cool character in manga and dramas. Seimei Shrine also makes various Seimei-related items… Oops, maybe I shouldn't put it that way. They have various amulets and such, which are also very popular."

"I—I see."

"And the bridge across the Hori River, right in front of Seimei Shrine, is Ichijou Modoribashi."

"Ichijou is the name of a street in Kyoto, isn't it?"

"That's right. It's in the northern part of what was the capital at the time."

"What about Modoribashi?"

"I don't know about the origin of the name, but they say Abe no Seimei kept a ghost under the bridge way back when."

"…Huh."

Masamichi took a careful glance at Shino as he responded to the driver.

The specter couldn't have missed their conversation, but his face was devoid of expression.

Maybe it's a story someone made up during a later generation…

Masamichi wondered about that, but he didn't dare to ask Shino about the Heian period in a cab.

In the end, Masamichi ended up listening to the driver's idle chitchat for almost twenty minutes.

"Okay, here we are," the driver said in a cheerful singsong voice, and they got out and saw a magnificent concrete parapet with the bridge's name, ICHIJOU, and MODORIBASHI inscribed in large letters.

A willow tree stood by the bridge, which was the only tasteful part of the scene.

The bridge was much more modern than Masamichi had expected. On the other hand, the Hori River was modest, narrower than the walkway built along its course, and the current wasn't very impressive.

Shino went to the middle of the bridge and peeked below it, and Masamichi followed suit.

The riverbank was fortified with concrete and stone walls, and there was no longer any sign of *a ghost* lurking under the bridge.

"It's kind of anticlimactic. I thought it would be an older, smaller bridge," Masamichi said honestly, and Shino looked up and around, clearly dejected.

"If this is where the bridge is, that means the road before us is the former Hori River Street. I'd expected to see at least a small trace of those days here."

"It's ultra-modern. A bus guide we had during my high school trip said the roads in Kyoto have maintained their grid patterns since the Heian period. Does that mean that was always a road?" Masamichi asked Shino as he looked out over the bridge at the wide road where cars sped by.

He felt his curiosity rising, thinking that although he was no expert, he was the only person in the whole wide world who could ask someone—a specter, who had *lived there during the Heian period*—about those times.

Shino nodded, still looking bored, as usual.

"Yeah. The road was narrower back then, and the dust was much worse on a sunny day like today."

"Oh, I get it. It wasn't paved then, huh? So, the bridge is much better than it was then?"

"Far better. But on the other hand, the river looks much weaker now because of what humans have done to it over the years." Shino smiled wryly. "According to Tokifuyu, Modoribashi has been here

since the capital was built during the Heian period. It must have been rebuilt on this spot several times since."

"And finally, it's become the majestic bridge we see now. Shino, was there really a ghost…an apparition, right? Was there really one under the bridge?"

Shino replied casually, "I don't know if Abe no Seimei kept one under the bridge. He was gone from this world by the time I became aware of the annoying yokels at the Bureau of Spiritual Mediums."

"Oh, okay. The Heian period was a pretty long era, huh? So the ghost—"

"The apparition no longer existed. But it was still dark and damp under the bridge, even during the day. It was a spot where *energy* would stagnate without any external help. It was a place where various figures lurked—those who had no place to live, those who engaged in shady dealings, and night robbers."

"So, you protected Tokifuyu when he passed by this place?"

"I had no intention whatsoever of protecting him, but we indeed used to walk across the bridge together. He didn't like ox-drawn carts, and he was reasonably fit."

"Huh. Tokifuyu liked walking, did he? That's surprising. I imagined Heian aristocrats as being elegant."

"The nobility were a diverse group. And he was the odd one out to the extreme."

"I don't know about extremes, but based on what you've said, I can appreciate that he was different in a good way."

"A thousand times what you imagine," Shino said bitterly, then approached the road and raised a hand. He flagged a cab that was passing by and said to Masamichi, "Get in."

The cab took off as soon as Masamichi was seated. Shino seemed to have already told the driver where to go.

"Where to next?" Masamichi asked, and Shino gave him another short answer.

"A place that probably no longer has meaning."

"…I beg your pardon?"

Masamichi inclined his head, not understanding what the specter was saying. But he knew it was wise to do as Shino said without asking questions when he spoke that way, so the young man sat silently, feeling both excited and anxious.

The cab soon approached a waterway that was much wider than the Hori River.

"Oh, this river—I often see it on TV… It's the Kamo River, right?"

Shino didn't respond, and the mild-mannered elderly driver answered for him.

"That's right. You can see the famous *nouryou yuka* there, though their season will soon be over."

"Oh, yes! The platforms raised over the water where people can sit and eat, right?"

"Yes, that's right. In the past, it was mostly Kyoto-style kaiseki cuisine, but those restaurants serve various types of food now. Japanese, Western, Chinese, and more. You can really find anything there."

"Ah…"

"Price-wise as well, I think more restaurants are offering food at reasonable prices. It's a seasonal thing, so why don't you give it a try while you have the opportunity?"

As they continued talking, the taxi finished crossing the river and turned into a somewhat narrow street, where the houses along the road were a mix of old and new.

My image of Kyoto was that the entire city was a tourist area, but it actually has residential areas. Well, of course.

The cab slowed down as Masamichi pondered such trivial matters. Still looking straight ahead, the driver said to Shino, "The address you gave me is around here, sir."

"Then we'll get off here."

"All right. Just give me a moment to find an easy place to park."

The driver moved forward a bit, found a spot that would be less likely to be in the way of following cars, and stopped the cab.

Masamichi got out first, looked around, and cocked his head, looking more curious than ever.

Sure enough, it looks like a place that doesn't have any meaning, like Shino said.

It was *an ordinary street corner*.

It wasn't the ancient capital that Masamichi knew, with its shops, shrines, temples, and lodging facilities, but rather a quiet, old-fashioned neighborhood.

The wooden townhouses that immediately came to mind when he imagined Kyoto were nowhere in sight. Tightly aligned were rows of private houses that seemed to have been built during the Showa era, probably after World War II, with almost no space between them.

Masamichi spoke curiously to Shino, who was getting out of the cab after paying the fare.

"This is a bit like our neighborhood. Is this where you used to live?"

Without answering, Shino looked around silently, then eventually said, "This way," and began walking. Masamichi hurried after him.

After walking for a few minutes, Shino suddenly came to a stop. Masamichi almost ran into the specter's back and paused as he followed Shino's gaze.

…Is he looking at that apartment building?

Directly in front of them was a five-story apartment building that looked brand-new.

It was probably low-rise because of strict building regulations.

It looked luxurious, with large windows, a chic brown exterior, and elegant, airy plants.

"It's a nice building. Does anyone you know live here?"

Masamichi wondered if there was someone Shino needed to see. The initial purpose of the trip had been to visit the sister of Bougyoudou's previous owner, after all.

But Shino slid his gaze away from the apartment building entrance to the edge of the property and muttered to himself,

"When the jar broke, and I was set free, they were in the midst of building a few modest houses here, but it appears they tore those down and built an apartment building. I…felt like something was calling me here, but perhaps it was my imagination. There really isn't anything here anymore."

"You said that before. What was here in the past?"

"This is where Tokifuyu's mansion stood—though it was more of a miserable shack."

"Huh?! This is where it was?!"

Stunned, Masamichi looked up at the magnificent apartment building.

He couldn't link its elegant appearance to an image of run-down houses in picture scrolls from the Heian period. It was so devoid of the atmosphere of the time that Masamichi could see why Shino described it as "a place that no longer had meaning."

"This is the *ushitora*…the unlucky direction for the capital. And there was a tiny seam in the barrier at hell's gate that protected the capital. Tokifuyu intentionally built his home on this spot and settled here while sealing that seam."

"Wasn't that dangerous? Oh, wait, he was a spiritual medium."

"He laughed about it, saying it was part of his job. And…it was in the spot where the seam existed that he sealed me in a jar."

Masamichi swallowed.

According to Shino, Tokifuyu Tatsumi had subdued the man-eating specter and made him his personal apparition. He'd said that one day, after many years of servitude, Tokifuyu had suddenly reduced Shino's powers to the limit, made the specter unable to take on a human form, and then sealed him in a jar and buried him in the ground.

Masamichi's heart ached when he recalled the anger and bitterness in Shino's voice when he told him the story, even though he put on a poker face.

Shino looks somewhat nostalgic when he talks about Tokifuyu. But when he mentions the time Tokifuyu sealed him in a jar…he's

quiet, but I can feel fury that sends shivers down my spine. To him, it must have been an incident that he still can't let go of, even after a thousand years.

Masamichi wanted to know more about Tokifuyu, but he had mixed feelings about their *breakup*. He wanted to hear about it, but it also seemed to be a topic that someone like him shouldn't broach.

But for once, Masamichi couldn't help asking.

"Shino, you told me when we first met that Tokifuyu…used you to close the gates to the capital to keep demons away, right?"

"As an item to seal the capital's gates to ward off demons."

"That's it!"

"He sealed me in a jar, dug a hole in the seam that came apart in the barrier, built a small shrine on top of it, and locked me underground with the utmost care. To put it in a way you can understand, he used me, a specter, to strengthen the barrier."

"I…see. Sorry, I know this is absurdly basic, but what's a barrier? Why did he need it?"

Shino looked fed up as he said, "In the principles of yin and yang, the hell's gate lies in the direction where dark and evil energies congregate, and monsters come and go. I don't know the logic behind it, but it was certainly relatively easy for us specters to enter and leave the capital through it."

"So, it's true, then?"

"These principles are essentially theories…and Tokifuyu said there was some truth to them."

Masamichi thought hard before asking another question.

"Okay. So, this barrier…protected the capital. And specters could come and go if they found an opening in the seam. But how did it get open?"

"Water," Shino said clearly.

"Water?"

"At the time, underground water gushed out around the gate to hell on this property. Water nourishes people, but it also attracts

apparitions. We specters can easily pass through a barrier if we hide in the water."

"Is that how it is? So, Tokifuyu lived there and repaired that opening… And he made the barrier even stronger by burying you?"

Shino nodded, his eyebrows furrowed.

"That's right. He put the mystical power he took from me into the jar and the shrine to seal me. He was a man who played dirty. He also lied and said, '*The shrine needs something to worship*,' and… Wait."

Masamichi was startled when Shino suddenly stopped talking. He wondered if the superintendent or a neighbor had seen them standing suspiciously in front of the apartment building and come outside to complain.

But there was no sign of that.

The area was eerily quiet, with only the occasional cyclist or pedestrian crossing the street. They glanced at Shino and Masamichi but passed by without seeming particularly interested in them.

What is going on? Shino's now staring at the hedges in front of the apartment building…

As Masamichi watched him nervously, Shino said, "There" and suddenly got up close to the hedges and crouched.

"Hey, Shino, that's someone's property…"

"Shut up," he snapped, took off his cardigan, and plunged his short-sleeved arm into the base of the plant.

Oh, God, what on earth are you doing? The superintendent is sure to come out if they see you.

Cold sweat broke out on Masamichi's back as he stood there helplessly and watched.

"Where is it…? There."

The sight of Shino crouching, with his long legs folded, and peering into the hedge with his cheek pressed against the ground was too bizarre, even for Masamichi.

He had never seen Shino acting so desperate without caring what anyone thought.

From where Masamichi stood, he couldn't see what Shino was doing with his hands, but judging by the sound, he seemed to be digging in the soil by the hedges.

"Seriously, Shino, what are you doing…?"

Feeling alarmed, Masamichi heard his voice begin to tremble with anxiety. But Shino didn't respond. He continued to move his hands around in the dirt.

"Hey, is something the matter?"

Finally, the entrance to the apartment building opened, and a middle-aged man dressed typically as a super in a shirt, slacks, tie, and cardigan appeared.

He must have caught sight of Masamichi from his office. He looked straight at Masamichi and walked up to him, his face clearly tense and alarmed.

"Shino…!"

Masamichi sounded as if he were praying as he called his master, and finally, Shino pulled his hands out of the hedges. They were filthy with mud, and he seemed to be holding something.

"I'm the manager of this apartment building. Do you have some business here? If you're visiting a resident… Oh! There's another one."

The manager looked stunned when he saw the tall, unrealistically good-looking Shino getting on his feet. Perhaps due to his line of work, he seemed to notice Shino's dirty hands right away.

"What were you doing down there? I'll call the police if I must."

"S-sorry. This isn't what you think."

Masamichi was disconcerted by the disturbing turn of events and tried to come up with an excuse, but Shino was as calm as ever.

"I was just retrieving something I dropped."

"Something you dropped?!"

The manager wasn't the only one who was startled. He and Masamichi exclaimed in unison. Shino reached for Masamichi's bag, pulled out a gauze towel, quickly wrapped whatever it was he had

retrieved in it, and carefully slipped it into the pocket of his tapered pants.

Then he picked up the cardigan he had tossed to the ground and calmly put it on.

"What did you lose? I can't imagine anyone dropping something in this hedge…"

In the face of Shino's fearless attitude, the superintendent's voice began to tremble with fear and anger.

Uh-oh. Shino's always like that, but that attitude is too much for someone seeing him for the first time. I have to do something… anything…or the man will really call the police. What would he possibly drop in a place like this…?!

Masamichi frantically racked his brains and came up with an answer. "A contact lens!"

"Huh?" the superintendent said in a squeaky, high-pitched falsetto voice.

Masamichi couldn't stand lying, but he had to do everything he could to keep him and Shino safe.

Fortunately, Masamichi didn't know what Shino had picked up, either.

Figuring it couldn't have been a contact lens, he felt a little less guilty about lying.

He suppressed the tremor in his voice, putting force into his stomach, acting as casual as possible…though that would never happen…and declared in a cheerful voice, "Yes, that's it. His contact lens flew off in the wind and fell into that hedge."

The superintendent looked at Masamichi and Shino as if he had been forced to drink strong vinegar. Masamichi put on an awkward smile as his heart raced, while Shino stood expressionless with his muddy hands.

"Was there a strong wind out here? It's amazing that you found it, groping in the hedge. Contact lenses are very small."

"Yes, so we were very lucky! But it got dirty, and he can't put it back in, which is why he can't see, and that's why he looks dazed.

We're, um, truly relieved!"

"Hey, I—"

"So we'll excuse ourselves now. Sorry for the trouble! He was looking for his contact lens! Come on, Shino, let's go!"

"Did you really lose your contact lens…?"

"Yes, really! Excuse us!" With that, Masamichi gave the man a bow, grabbed Shino's cardigan by the cuff, pulled with all his might, and started walking away.

The only thing on his mind was that they had to get away from this scene as soon as possible. "Excuse us. We're really sorry for causing a commotion!"

The super remained standing on the spot, still looking suspicious, and Masamichi kept looking back and bowing as he pulled Shino by the sleeve and walked away at full speed.

Of course, he wouldn't be able to take a single step forward if Shino planted his feet on the ground even a bit, but, albeit reluctantly, the specter moved his legs to match the young man's stride.

Maybe he was amused, seeing Masamichi look at him with a rare hair-raising expression that said they had to go right away.

Whatever, I'm glad Shino's willing to come with me. We have to get away from here. If the man calls the police, the story would get too complicated and out of my hands.

"Excuse us. Bye!"

Masamichi kept turning around every few seconds, bowing and apologizing as he dragged Shino away, and he somehow managed to turn a large corner and escape from the super's sight.

He finally stopped after walking furiously along the empty road without slowing down and let out a deep sigh, "Haaahhh," when he was sure they had managed to get away.

"It doesn't look like he's coming after us. W-we're safe…"

"…Ridiculous. Why do we have to fear some unarmed building manager?"

Shino shook off Masamichi's hand a little roughly. Masamichi was grateful he had come with him this far without doing that, so he apologized and put his hand to his own chest.

"I'm sorry for dragging you, my master, out here. But that man really would have called the police. It's a good thing we managed to bluff our way out of there, but what exactly were you looking for? Your hands are all muddy. You have to wash them somewhere."

Shino didn't respond. But he looked grumpy and said, "What's wrong with collecting what's mine? I shouldn't be blamed for it."

"…What's yours? Sure, that site is where Tokifuyu's mansion stood, but isn't it your first time back since they built that apartment building? Why would they have something that belongs to you?"

Again, Shino didn't answer Masamichi's question but said, "I'm going to walk a little" and got moving.

"Oh, o-okay. Where to next? But shouldn't you wash your hands first…?"

Shino didn't appear interested in answering Masamichi's questions.

"Ngh… I guess all I can do is go with him."

Whenever he went out with Shino, Masamichi couldn't help feeling that he was a baby duckling.

Feeling like a baby bird struggling to keep up with its mother, Masamichi looked back in the direction of the apartment building, wondering if the superintendent or the police would come after them, and followed Shino, a few steps behind him.

A little while later—

Shino dipped his hands in the river and carefully washed off the dirt.

Masamichi sat on the bank of the Kamo River and watched him in silence.

As Shino came and sat next to him, Masamichi apologized for only having tissues to offer and extracted a pack. It was because Shino had taken the gauze towel he carried around to wipe his

hands. Shino said, "I don't need that" but ended up taking it and drying his hands anyway.

"I remember Yoriko scolding me when I said I didn't need a towel and could use my clothes to wipe my hands," he said.

"Heh-heh! You're like that sometimes, acting like a naughty boy. You should clean your hands with these tissues, or you'll get your lovely new outfit dirty. But the cuffs of your cardigan got a little soiled, since you put it on with dirty hands."

"It's no big deal. It isn't as if I've torn it into pieces."

Masamichi took the tissues that Shino started shoving into his pocket after wiping his hands. He tucked them into his bag and quietly looked at the specter.

He couldn't help but question the specter about his bizarre behavior in front of that apartment building. But at the same time, he also wanted to avoid ruining his master's mood while they were on the road.

He was torn between these thoughts, as if a tug-of-war was going on in his mind.

As for Shino, he was sitting on the riverbank, staring at the surface of the water, with his legs stretched out comfortably. There wasn't enough emotion on his face for Masamichi to read.

With no other choice, Masamichi decided to enjoy the scenery while he waited for Shino to do something.

Some of the nouryou yuka eateries appeared to be open for lunch, and he could see some customers seated here and there.

The *yuka* is a large wooden deck that extends from each restaurant along the Kamo River. It was a festive sight, with some restaurants decorated with lanterns and such.

The traditional business must have begun as a way for people to enjoy a meal with the cool evening breeze blowing over the river, a way to spend the hot, humid Kyoto summers a little more comfortably.

Oh, right, it's almost lunchtime. It's nice to eat outside, and it looks fun. And the smell is heavenly!

Masamichi's nose twitched when he picked up the aroma wafting through the air.

It's true what that cab driver said about various restaurants being out there. I smell Chinese food. I wonder what Chinese food in Kyoto is like. I want to try it.

Amused by the fact that he had become quite the gourmand, Masamichi smiled.

Back when he lived at home, he had grown up eating the simple, home-cooked meals his mother and grandmother made.

When he started living on his own, he understood how nice those home-cooked meals had been. Still, he was never particularly interested in food.

But after moving in with Shino, he started eating the homestyle meals that Shino made. He looked bored but cooked with the utmost care, and that was the first time that Masamichi became serious about food.

It was because, through Shino, Masamichi could feel the love that Yoriko felt for her family through the meals she cooked for them, which she taught Shino. He realized then that Yoriko's efforts in cooking their daily meals were the same as those of his mother and grandmother.

To savor the flavors of something that someone had made for him.

To be curious about the ingredients that Shino was particular about.

That was the type of attitude that Masamichi had naturally nurtured during these past six months.

However, the reason why Shino served Masamichi homemade foods was because he believed the boy's excellent chi would stagnate if he didn't eat right.

You could say that as a specter who loved the taste of his chi, he was only protecting his own diet.

Still, I'm super happy and grateful that he cooks delicious meals for me. It would be even nicer if he let me help, but he doesn't want

that. I guess I'm too clumsy, and it frustrates him…

Pondering such thoughts, Masamichi looked at the surface of the river that Shino was staring at.

Illuminated by the bright sun, the river was wide, and the currents flowed slowly and quietly.

Everyone seemed to be relaxed and enjoying themselves—the people walking on the nearby bridge, those strolling along the riverbed, and those who sat on the grass along the gentle slope of the riverbed.

Oh, yeah, they were saying on TV before that this riverbed was famous for couples sitting at equal intervals from one another.

With that thought in mind, he could see that it wasn't as crowded as he'd seen on TV, but more than ten couples sat along the river.

He had no idea about the couples' relationships, but they maintained equal distance from one another, including from him and Shino.

I guess we did that unconsciously. It's funny, like everyone's being territorial.

Upon closer examination, some were eating out of lunch boxes laid out on the grass before them. That made sense. Lunch on the riverbed was more casual than at the restaurants by the river, and the atmosphere was wonderful.

I want to suggest to Shino that we have lunch somewhere, too, but he doesn't have to eat human food, and I'm not very hungry, since I ate too much at breakfast. Too bad.

Masamichi let out a small sigh.

The breakfast that Henri so enthusiastically prepared for them was a dream breakfast, similar to what one might expect at a Japanese inn—not that it included many dishes.

It consisted of a small pot of boiled tofu, grilled salmon, a thick omelet, pickled vegetables, and lustrous rice cooked in a clay pot.

Each dish was wonderfully delicious and unpretentious, simple fare, but prepared after careful consideration of the ingredients, seasonings, and cooking methods.

Even Shino said it was good, which was rare for him, and Masamichi ended up having three bowls of rice—with scorched rice, a lovely delicacy, soaked in green tea as his final bowl. He'd felt like his stomach was going to burst when he checked out.

At this moment, he felt envious of people enjoying delicious meals, but he still didn't feel like eating.

I don't know why Shino came here, but this is great. We didn't have this kind of time to relax when we were in London.

Masamichi pulled his knees to his chest and held them loosely with his arms, resting his chin on the kneecaps like a grade-school student during gym class.

The sun warmed his entire body, and perhaps because of the earlier exhaustion he'd experienced, he started getting drowsy.

As Masamichi was about to doze off, Shino whispered, "I thought that at least this place would have traces remaining of the old days… but the water's surface is about all that hasn't changed. They may call Kyoto an ancient capital, but most things change after a thousand years."

"…!"

The sleepiness was instantly gone, and Masamichi looked up from his knees.

"Is this another familiar place for you? Did you often come here with Tokifuyu?"

Shino nodded slightly.

"I crossed the bridge countless times doing Tokifuyu's errands. But this is the first time I've come down to the riverbed."

"Oh. Then it's full of memories for you, even if things have changed."

"I have no sensitivities to appreciate nostalgia."

Rather than pointing out that the specter had been going around to all the places he'd frequented in the past, Masamichi held his tongue and waited for Shino to continue.

"Here on this riverbed…in fact, this very spot where we are…is where Tokifuyu lost his life."

Masamichi jolted in surprise at the sudden confession.

"Huh?! Oops, sorry, that was too loud. But…here?!"

He'd jumped to his feet, so Masamichi sat down again and looked around in horror.

All he could see was concrete, soil, and grass. Nothing seemed tied to a person's death.

Well, more than a thousand years have gone by, so that's no surprise. But…

Fearfully, Masamichi asked Shino, whose eyes were still glued to the river's current, "What happened? Did someone attack him?"

"It was an accident. Ostensibly, that is."

"Ostensibly?"

Shino finally raised his head and looked at the bridge where many people were coming and going.

"That bridge was rebuilt, but there was one in almost the same spot at the time."

"…Okay."

Masamichi looked up at the magnificent concrete bridge, trying to imagine what it may have been like before.

"That evening, Tokifuyu received an invitation from a certain aristocratic acquaintance."

"You mean for dinner?"

"Food and drinks, basically. There was a full moon out that night. Perhaps it was a moon viewing party."

"Oh, okay."

Without looking at Masamichi, who was nodding, Shino continued speaking in a distant tone, as if he were talking about some stranger.

"He usually liked to walk, but that night, he rode in an ox-driven cart that had come for him. And…he died."

"Hey, you've left out too much. Why? What happened? Was there an accident with the cart? A traffic accident?"

Instead of nodding, Shino lowered his gaze.

“The ox pulling the cart suddenly ran amok when they were halfway across the bridge. The person operating the cart ran away in fear, and the ox cart lost control and hit the bridge parapet so hard that…Tokifuyu was thrown out and fell headfirst into the riverbank.”

“…!”

Masamichi swallowed.

Shino spoke matter-of-factly, allowing him to visualize the scene clearly.

A big bull, snorting and rampaging, a cart rocking violently like a ship tossed around in rough seas, and Tokifuyu being thrown out, his sleeves spread like wings, falling in slow motion…

“His body flew through the air like a paper doll and slammed helplessly to the ground…and he stopped moving.”

“Shino, wait. You could have saved him if you were around… Oh! You were already trapped in that jar, weren’t you?”

Shino nodded. His expression was cold, like a Noh mask that was devoid of emotion.

“Yeah. I sent my consciousness out of the jar and witnessed my master’s death. If only I had been with him, he wouldn’t have died so tragically. It served him right.”

“What a thing to say…! But why did the bull suddenly go berserk?”

“It was a bee.”

“A bee?”

Shino finally looked at his wide-eyed servant and nodded.

“A frighteningly large bee came and stung the cow on the nose. The pain caused it to panic.”

“Oh, a bee. I was stung by a bee once, too. It got very swollen and was painful. It was probably a hornet if it was huge. But wait. This was in the evening, right? Bees aren’t active at night, are they?”

“It’s sharp of you to notice that.”

For just a moment, Shino smirked, then his straight face returned as he said, “That was no normal bee. It was a spirit, taking on the form of a bee.”

"A spirit? You mean a specter?"

"That's right. A spiritual medium who had a history with Tokifuyu sent the spirit to attack him after he lost his escort—me. No other spiritual medium would have defeated Tokifuyu if they had fought with their spiritual techniques. But…with an accident, there is nothing a vulnerable human can do."

"Oh, no…! Didn't anyone besides you notice that? How about Tokifuyu's colleagues or other spiritual mediums?"

"Tokifuyu was known as the odd man out. No colleague was willing to make the effort to discover the truth for him. His only friend buried his corpse in Toribeno, as he had wished before his death."

"That's… That isn't good, but that's a consolation. So they mourned him properly. Is that where his grave is? Do you want to go there?"

Shino answered "no" with a small shake of his head.

"Even if we went there, no grave exists."

"Huh?! But…"

"Toribeno was a burial site. The remains of the poor and those without family were abandoned there, left out in the open to rot."

"Oh no…!"

"I couldn't get out of the jar. I just watched that night as thieves peeled the clothes off his corpse and then watched as his body rotted…and eventually turned to white bones, and even those bones crumbled back into the earth."

"Shino…"

"I wanted to kick his skull, at least, and crush it."

"Shino!"

Masamichi raised his voice accusingly, and Shino glared at him, making the younger man shrug his small shoulders.

"S-sorry. I know I have no right to say anything about that. But… Shino, didn't you come here to mourn your master?"

Shino clucked his tongue in disapproval.

“Don’t try to measure a specter by human standards. I have no intention of doing that.”

“But…”

“All I wanted was to see with my own eyes and step on this spot that I could only see from inside a jar before.”

“Ngh…”

Masamichi wanted to say there had to be more to it than that, but he didn’t dare to argue with Shino any further. As he timidly backed off, Shino said in a rough tone, “I’m going to stay here for a while. You go and roam around as you please.”

Contrary to the harshness of his tone, it was a generous offer to give his servant free time.

But Masamichi shook his head.

“I’ll go somewhere if I’m in your way, but if I’m not, then let me stay with you. If Tokifuyu doesn’t have a grave, I’d like to express my gratitude to him at this place where he lost his life…”

“Your gratitude? You have no business feeling gratitude toward Tokifuyu.”

Startled by the sharp sound of Shino’s voice that came out like a whip, Masamichi retorted quietly, “That’s not true. I wouldn’t have met you if you hadn’t been his shikigami—his apparition—and I would have died that night in that hit-and-run.”

Shino’s eyes widened in surprise, but he didn’t attempt to say anything back. All he did was shrug slightly, as if to say, “Do as you please.”

“…Thanks. I’ll be quiet.”

With that, Masamichi went back to watching the river as Shino had been doing.

Shino lay on his back in the grass, unconcerned about dirtying his clothes.

The two sat quietly, lost in their own thoughts, at the site where Tokifuyu, Shino’s master, tragically lost his life over a millennium ago…

CHAPTER 5

An Entangled Past

"Hey, wake up."

Shaken roughly on the shoulder, Masamichi jerked up with a start.

In front of him was Shino's grumpy face.

"Whoa, Shino. You startled me. My heart's beating like mad. Where am I…?"

Seeing that he was lying on a bed that was much larger and fluffier than his bed at home, Masamichi paused for a moment and then said, "Oh." Then, as he gathered his wits, he continued, "Ah, right. We came to a hotel for a little rest…and I fell asleep, huh?"

Masamichi looked around the room, patting his chest with the palm of his hand to calm his still-thumping heart.

They were at a hotel near Kyoto City Hall that was quite unlike the inn they'd stayed at the previous night.

Apparently, Shino had asked Henri to arrange their lodgings in Kyoto while Masamichi was stretched out on his back with heatstroke from his bath.

It wasn't as luxurious as the hotel they'd stayed at in London, but the spacious room was furnished with simple, elegant items in a classic Kyoto-style setting.

Realizing that the lights were turned on in the room and he could see through the large window that it was completely dark outside, Masamichi quickly apologized to Shino.

"Sorry, it's already nighttime. I was going to lie down for a bit, but I can't believe I left my master alone and snoozed away."

"You can say that again."

Shino looked appalled as he sat on his bed, but he didn't appear as offended as Masamichi had feared.

"That Tokifuyu often made excuses for his long naps, saying people got sleepy after being in the sun, but I suppose there was a shred of truth to it. To think that my servant would be the same way."

"That might be true. It was before three o'clock when we came to our hotel. We spent quite a while on the riverbank, so maybe the heat got to me. Are you okay, Shino?"

"Don't compare me with your everyday specter. Sunlight is nothing to me. I had nothing to do in particular, so I lay down beside you and breathed in the chi that you were discharging defenselessly."

"Y-you did that here?"

"I tapped lightly on your chest with the palm of my hand, just like you once did to me, and you started mumbling happily in your sleep and gave off very good chi."

"H-hey… What do you think you're doing…?!"

Masamichi blushed.

When they first met, Masamichi desperately refused Shino's attempt to suck out his chi by having sex with him. As an alternative, he suggested sleeping in the same bed and nothing else, so he could offer Shino his chi.

Since then, Shino would call him to his room whenever the mood struck, and they would sleep together under the same covers.

At first, Masamichi had been stiff and nervous. But Shino always told him stories from the past so he could relax and release quality chi.

He was delighted to hear Shino tell stories about his late master, Tokifuyu, and about the previous owner of Bougyoudou and his wife in his unique matter-of-fact tone, and sleeping with Shino was becoming a secret pleasure of his.

Masamichi was embarrassed, even after months had gone by, to hear that Shino had been sleeping next to him without his

knowledge and replacing the chitchat with something like lulling a child to sleep.

Disregarding Masamichi's embarrassment, Shino put on the cardigan he had taken off and got on his feet.

"It's time. Let's go."

"Go where?"

"Dinner. Perhaps anticipating your interest, Yoshida reserved a table along the Kamo River for us."

"Yoshida? Oh, Henri! He not only arranged for this hotel but also made a dinner reservation for us?"

"He said dinner was on him. I had no intention of accepting his charity, but I decided to relent, since he said he still hadn't thanked me enough for what I did for him five years ago."

Masamichi wanted to point out that he should be saying "thank you" instead of "I decided to relent," but it was meaningless to say that to a specter. He decided to give Henri a thank-you call later.

"Are you going to sit on your bed forever? Come on, let's go."

By the time he said "Let's go," Shino had walked a considerably long distance from Masamichi.

"Coming! Oh, where did I put my shoes?"

Dismayed, Masamichi pondered the fact that he always seemed to be in a hurry, as he shoved his feet into the sneakers that were next to the bed, grabbed his bag, and chased after Shino, who had already left the room.

About three hours later—

They were sitting at a table at one of the restaurants on the nouryou-yuka along the Kamo River.

Masamichi had assumed that the restaurant they went to would have low tables and cushions, but it had tables and chairs and served full-course French cuisine.

Each part of the course would be brought to them at a leisurely pace, and they'd listen to the hustle and bustle from the other

restaurants around them while they enjoyed the night view across the river and the cool breeze.

After experiencing a truly elegant dinner, Masamichi finally finished the last of his coffee and a small baked sweet and rubbed his belly, which was a step or two beyond full, as it had been the previous night.

"Wow, that was good. These last two days, I've been pampered too much. If it weren't for you, Shino, I doubt that I would have ever known traveling like this. I mean, this is my first time at a nouryou yuka, and it's also the first time that I have tasted truffles and sea eels. I don't know about those truffles, but was that sea eel a fried dish?"

"Deep-fried."

"Yeah, that's it. Gee, it was good. Crispy on the outside, light and fluffy on the inside. They cooked that sea eel by making small cuts in the bones to make it go down smoothly, right? There are so many different kinds of delicious foods in the world."

Shino tossed a petite madeleine into his mouth and said gruffly, "You know too little about everything."

"Ngh. I can't say anything about that. I'm still ignorant, just like I was before, but since I met you, I've been experiencing things I never came across before in my life. I sometimes wonder…what would have happened to me if I hadn't met you…if that car hadn't run me over that day," Masamichi said, tossing a tiny cake into his mouth and discovering that it was a warm and surprisingly rich banana cake.

Shino sniggered.

"No matter how much effort you made, you wouldn't have gotten into college. Disappointed, you would have gone back to your hometown, found that your family had left its farming business, and given yourself up to despair trying crazy things and failing at everything, or resigning yourself to what was handed to you. That's about it. It certainly isn't hard to imagine."

"…I was thinking along those lines, but you didn't have to make it that clear. I think my heart's starting to ache."

Masamichi looked at Shino, sitting across from him. Unfortunately, he couldn't see the ground from his position, but it had to be the riverbed site where Tokifuyu had fallen to his death.

"Tokifuyu defeated you during the Heian period, and he made you his personal apparition. Then, for some reason that I can't fathom, he sealed you in a jar and buried you in the ground. And…a thousand years go by, the jar broke during construction work, and you were set free."

Pressing his lips to his coffee cup, Shino furrowed his brows and stared at his servant as the young man abruptly began to summarize what had happened to him to date.

Masamichi continued talking, using his fingers to count off the points he mentioned as he retraced his master's history.

"Then, you were able to take on a human form again, and you met Daizou and Yoriko, started living with them, and inherited their store. Then I was almost killed in a hit-and-run accident on a street that you happened to be passing by… It's strange and moving to think that the fact that we're together like this now is the result of an amazing series of events."

"…Is that how it seems? Listen, what has occurred has occurred, nothing more. Humans always want to find the causes and effects and reasons for things they have experienced, but what meaning is there to that?"

Masamichi picked up a small meringue, put it in his mouth, and slowly let it melt as he thought. Then he opened his mouth again to speak.

"No matter how hard I try to think about it, I can't figure out how or why these things have been happening. But…I want to be grateful for everything that has happened. I'm not happy at all about that hit-and-run, but if that's what it took for me to meet you…"

"Yes?"

Masamichi took a sip of coffee, as if organizing his thoughts, then put the cup back on the saucer and looked straight at Shino.

"I'm so happy to have met you, Shino, that I can say I'm glad I had that accident. I'm truly pleased to be with you now. That's how I feel."

It sounded like a confession—of friendship or love—and Masamichi's round cheeks turned bright red. Shino, on the other hand, looked at him suspiciously.

"You're *what*? You're glad you fell to the rank of a servant? You're really a natural-born servant, aren't you?"

"That's not what I mean! Sure, I have some thoughts about being a servant, but still, you saved my life. I can't find any other way to repay you for that besides being your servant."

"That's true."

"You give me food and lodging, let me experience various things with you, allow me to meet different people, and I've gradually gotten to know you better… That certainly isn't *falling to the rank of a servant* in my book. I'm very fulfilled and happy now, and it's all thanks to you."

Shino stopped talking back to him coldly, and the corners of his mouth turned downward in a frown.

After living with him for six months, Masamichi had come to understand that the sullen look on Shino's face was actually an expression of slight embarrassment.

If he were dealing with a human, he could say, "You know what I mean?" and let his words hang in the air, but Shino couldn't—or wouldn't—accept that, since he was a specter.

So, since they were on the road and could spend a good amount of time together, he decided to work up his courage and take another step forward to express his honest feelings.

With that decision made, he aligned his hands together on his lap, looked Shino in the face, and cleared his throat.

"You know what, Shino?"

Masamichi wasn't as shy as he usually was. Instead, the look on his conveyed his enthusiasm, and even Shino subtly corrected his posture, as if a little surprised.

"What is it?"

"I know you only think of me as a half-wit servant or as *food with legs* that can add a bit of power to your magical abilities, but I've gotten to know you a little over these past six months. Of course, I do about eighty percent of the talking, but still!"

"…You're taking too long to get to the point."

"Sorry! What I'm trying to say is that this is a big change from when we first met, but my feelings for you are—"

At that moment, music rang in their ears, seemingly coming from quite far away.

The tone was powerful, and it resonated well into the distance.

Masamichi's shoulders slumped as he was interrupted at the last minute from saying what he had worked up his nerve to say. He turned his attention in the direction of the sound.

It seemed to be coming from upstream.

"What was that? A flute?"

Shino scowled and said, "A hichiriki. A double-reed instrument. That's a strange tune, and the performance isn't good."

"Isn't it? I can't tell… A hichiriki is an instrument used in gagaku, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's the sound of the earth, used to play the main melody in gagaku," Shino said as he nodded, and that was when he and Masamichi heard the sounds of people's voices and footsteps clattering down the riverbed in their direction.

"Didn't someone say Kagiroi was here in Kyoto?!"

"What?! You're kidding. Was that Kagiroi playing?"

"He's performing at a concert tomorrow."

"Huh?! Really? Is he really here?"

"I heard it's a secret concert! Isn't that him playing over there? Let's go check it out!"

“Oh my God, I couldn’t get a ticket to his concert. I’ll be super lucky if I get to hear him play for free.”

“I like his music, but I would do anything to see his face!

“So you’re a fan of his looks, huh?!”

People were running upstream, breathing unevenly and chatting about the star.

A deep, crease appeared between Shino’s eyebrows.

“Kagiroi?”

“Oh!” Masamichi said, and he tried to explain, full of confidence, to his master. “I overheard people talking about him at that inn. This Kagiroi seems to be a really popular gagaku musician. I saw a poster of him at Kyoto Station. It was a great-looking photo of him.”

“A gagaku…musician? I don’t like his name. The sound of that hichiriki is also very irritating,” Shino said grumpily.

Masamichi cocked his head inquisitively.

“I can’t tell if he’s good or bad, but wouldn’t he have to be good with the hichiriki if he’s that popular?”

“People of this era don’t know quality gagaku. This is as bad as Tokifuyu’s playing.”

“You’re dissing Tokifuyu’s skill at the flute while you’re at it…? Okay, but this man still looks cool. I heard last night that people pass out when they see him at his concerts.”

The crease between Shino’s brows deepened. He could probably hold three or four thin sheets of paper in those creases.

“They do? Do you mean the audience, or does the musician pass out?”

“I wondered about that, too, but I checked, and it’s the people in the audience. It seems people who go to Kagiroi’s concerts get so excited that they pass out while listening to him perform. I’ve never heard of gagaku music getting people that excited.”

“I haven’t, either. Who is this individual who sounds so utterly suspicious?”

Masamichi sensed that Shino’s grumpy meter was spiking before his eyes.

It was a shame that the conclusion of an enjoyable dinner was disturbed in this way. Still, he couldn't exactly tell Shino not to worry about it after giving him so much detail about the gagaku performer.

"I don't know much about him, either… Oh, just a minute."

Masamichi pulled out his phone, searched, enlarged the photo that he found to fill the screen, and showed it to Shino.

"Here he is! This is the musician. It's also my first time seeing his face, but he's good-looking, isn't he? In a different way from your handsome appearance…"

"…!"

A sharp sound came from Shino's throat, as if something was cutting the wind.

"Huh?! Shino? What's wrong?"

Don't tell me he's mad because I praised someone else's looks…? No, that couldn't be. But I've never seen him look like that.

Shino's handsome face was clearly tense. Masamichi knew blood didn't flow to the specter's face, since his body was a temporary *vessel*, but for some reason, it looked like the blood had drained from his face.

It appeared that Shino had unwittingly been greatly shocked by the publicity photo of *gagaku musician Kagiroi* that Masamichi showed him.

"Ka-gi-roi…"

"Yeah, Kagiroi. It's an unusual name. I wonder if he has roots in a foreign country."

"I know where he comes from. He comes from darkness."

"Huh?!"

Shino's almond-shaped eyes narrowed until they resembled a Japanese sword, and his low, subdued voice sent shivers down Masamichi's spine. It was frigid yet seething with furious anger.

Masamichi timidly put away his phone.

"Don't tell me you know Kagiroi? Have you…had some type of trouble with him…?"

"Trouble?"

Shino stood up with a grim look on his face. He rose with such force that his chair fell back. The guests around them turned to look in surprise, but he seemed unconcerned. Or perhaps he simply didn't have the capacity to care.

"Shino? Seriously, what's the matter?" Masamichi asked, also getting to his feet. Without answering him, Shino gestured with his hand, as if to shake off the somewhat melancholy tune of the hichiriki that they continued to hear.

"Kagiroi… This face… I see. It's him."

"Shino? Are you okay?"

Slapping away Masamichi's hand as he tried to touch his arm, Shino said in a grave voice, "Kagiroi. He's the one who killed Tokifuyu."

"…!"

This time, it was Masamichi's turn to gasp.

"Shino, what are you saying…?"

Masamichi was shocked, and Shino replied curtly, with a stern look on his face, "Exactly what I said. He killed Tokifuyu. You said earlier…that people passed out at his concerts, didn't you?"

Masamichi nodded repeatedly, totally lost.

"Yeah, though it's just a rumor."

"And what did you say he was doing…upstream?"

"People running along the riverbed were saying it was a secret concert. The hichiriki is all I could make out, so maybe he really is suddenly putting on a spur-of-the-moment performance."

"…Let's go!"

Shino ran out of the restaurant. Hurtling forward like a bullet, he startled not only the other people on the nouryou yuka but also the restaurant staff and patrons inside, who gazed at him, their mouths hanging open.

"Shino?! H-hey, we have to settle the check…! Oh, right, Henri already paid for it. But it isn't right to leave without saying anything… Aaahh…!"

Whatever it was, it was too dangerous to let Shino take off alone at this point. However, a member of the restaurant staff came running out, concerned about what was happening. Masamichi explained that something urgent had come up, quickly apologized, and left. There was a narrow alley in front of the restaurant, still swarming with tourists, although it was already past nine PM.

Masamichi looked left and right, but Shino was no longer in sight. But he was sure the specter was sprinting down to the riverbed toward Kagiroi, who was upstream.

I could never catch up if Shino ran at full speed, but I have to go as fast as I can…!

Masamichi hurried through the crowd toward the upper part of the river, attempting to reach the riverbed.

Many people were out on the promenade, heading toward the direction from which the hichiriki was coming. They all rushed along the dark path, attempting to catch a glimpse of the secret performance.

Shino… Shino, please, don't do anything rash. What in the world did he mean when he said…Kagiroi killed Tokifuyu? He said a bee caused the bull pulling the ox cart to go berserk…

It was hard to think straight while running as fast as he could.

But anyway, Masamichi kept running frantically through the crowd, trying to spot Shino and catch up with him.

Soon, a crowd entered his field of vision.

Probably around one hundred people.

Everyone was pushing and shoving, holding out their phones and tablets with arms outstretched, trying to capture a photo or video of Kagiroi, whom Masamichi expected was playing his hichiriki beyond them but who he couldn't see because of his height.

Still, judging by the sound, Kagiroi seemed closer now.

Oh, God, this is bad. I'm surrounded by people all around, and I can't see beyond them at all. I can't find Shino, either. It's a little dark here, too… Huh?

Masamichi had nervously been going around in circles, trying to find a way to break into the crowd, but he suddenly felt a shiver run down his spine and turned around.

"What was that…?"

He felt a presence right behind him and turned around again, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Just people dashing toward him, one after the other.

This isn't good. If this keeps up, there will be more and more people out here, and I won't be able to find Shino.

Panicking wasn't going to do any good, but he couldn't help it, as he suddenly realized that something strange was happening.

People who had been rushing in the direction of Kagiroi's hichiriki suddenly came to a halt, paused absently for a moment, inclined their heads with vacant eyes…and plodded away from the area.

"Huh?! Why are they heading back after coming all the way out here?"

Masamichi was stunned.

Indeed, with this crowd, maybe it was hard to see Kagiroi performing.

He wouldn't have been surprised if people who had planned to take photos of his secret concert and sell them to the media had given up and left.

But it was strange that even the women who looked to be Kagiroi's fans were also stopping and leaving with strange looks on their faces instead of staying and listening to him play.

Masamichi listened closely to what they were saying and was horrified by the eeriness of the situation.

"Why did I come running out here?"

"I don't know. Were we racing?"

"Don't be silly. But…I really wonder what got into us. Oh, well, let's go."

"Yeah. Let's go for a drink at Kiyamachi or thereabouts."

"Good idea!"

That was the type of thing the women near him said as they left. People who came later all turned on their heels almost amusingly and walked away.

Huh…? What's going on? The flute music is still playing.

That was when Masamichi heard a low voice in his ear and jumped.

"It's a barrier."

"Huh?! Oh, Shino!"

Surprise and relief came together at once, and Masamichi didn't realize he'd exhaled and rubbed his chest.

"You got me worried, suddenly taking off like that. What's this about a barrier…?"

Shino put his mouth to Masamichi's ear and whispered, "He doesn't want the hassle of creating a big fuss. Kagiroi put up a barrier so that people who just came to the area wouldn't be aware of his presence. He must have put some spell on the barrier to make their memory hazy."

"He can do that?"

"If he knows how…and has the power."

As soon as Shino spoke, the music ended, and the crowd erupted in cheers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for listening to my spur-of-the-moment concert. Tonight, I have only this flute. Please enjoy the simple yet rich sound of the hichiriki."

That must be Kagiroi. I still can't see him, but he has a rich, handsome voice. It carries almost as well as his music.

People applauded in response. Masamichi heard the sound of smartphones and camera shutters everywhere, which sounded like music in itself.

Shino's voice is sharp, like a whip or a laser beam, but Kagiroi's voice… It's more sonorous and sounds relaxed.

As Masamichi ruminated, Shino leaned over and whispered, "Open up your third eye now, while you still can."

"Huh?!"

Masamichi was startled.

The third eye was the mysterious tool that Shino had taught him about. It was invisible…but definitely existed, though Masamichi didn't know if it actually took the form of an eye.

Masamichi's spirit truly awakened when the eye opened under the skin and beyond the bones between his eyebrows. Once it opened, he could see or sense all beings without form in this world.

"Shino, wait. I can't open it on my own. I—"

Masamichi was about to tell him that it wasn't possible, when the sound of the hichiriki once again echoed through the area.

Unaware that they had been trapped within the barrier, the audience welcomed Kagiroi with an even greater round of applause.

Wait a minute. What's the meaning of a secret concert within a barrier? I can understand if a musician is trying to limit the number of people who come to his concert, but Shino told me to open my "third eye," and there has to be a reason for that… But this is the same musical tone I heard before…

Masamichi remained perplexed, listening to the music as it resounded, seeming to make the night air tingle and tremble.

It was a completely different tone from the graceful and peaceful tune he'd heard earlier.

The tempo was fast, and the melody was volatile, with many ups and downs. Masamichi could feel the huge amount of air with which the player played his flute, and an intense tone resonated, sounding like it was cutting through the air with a knife.

"This must be an original piece. I've never heard intense gagaku music like this… Ah!" As Masamichi tried to tell Shino his impression of the number, a few people in front of him fell toward him. "Oh… U-um, are you okay? Someone, please help us…! Huh?!"

Masamichi was crouching, trying to tend to the fallen audience members and calling out for assistance, when he suddenly drew back in fear at the sight before him.

Amid the crowd surrounding Kagiroi, people were collapsing one by one.

They all flopped to the ground like puppets with broken strings.

Yet the people around didn't seem to notice it at all.

They surrendered themselves to the intense sound of the hichiriki, swaying their bodies, as if in a trance. Their swaying movements gradually became greater, and the moment they closed their eyes, they seemed to lose consciousness and fall to the ground.

"Huh…? What the heck…? Oh…!"

Alone and dismayed, Masamichi staggered to his feet.

For some reason, he had no strength in his legs.

It wasn't only his legs. He could tell that the strength was suddenly going out of his arms, neck, torso—and all the joints needed to support the body—as if someone had turned off a switch.

Dang, this isn't good. Is this because of Kagiroi's music? Is this what they meant by people passing out at his concerts…?

Still, Masamichi managed to stay on his feet, but finally, his eyelids raised a white flag. He tried to keep his eyes wide open, but they closed like automatic shutters.

Oh, no. I'm going to collapse, too…

His efforts were in vain, and his knees buckled. He was about to fall to the ground when Shino's strong arms wrapped around his waist. He pulled Masamichi up and made him lean on him, and somehow, Masamichi avoided sinking into a stupor.

"Fool! I told you to open your third eye!"

Shino's reprimand seemed to come from somewhere far away. Masamichi desperately squeezed out his voice.

"B-but…I…can't… Not…alone."

"Then hurry up and say so!"

With a low grunt, Shino placed his cold index finger between Masamichi's eyebrows. A sharp, intense pain immediately shot through the young man's brain, as if he had been pierced with a spear of ice. He realized it was the feeling of a large eye slowly opening deep inside him.

"…! Ngh. Mmm."

Masamichi began to scream, but Shino swallowed it with his lips, and it disappeared.

The lips of a specter with no body temperature pressed snugly against Masamichi's warm lips. Gasping in pain, Masamichi sensed his foggy mind registering something warm flowing into him from Shino.

What…is this…?

It probably only went on for a few seconds.

Gradually, the sound of the hichiriki approached again, and as Masamichi's strength returned to him, Shino let go.

"Oh…"

Masamichi tried to thank Shino, but he was rendered speechless by the changed scene around him.

His now-open third eye saw a reddish-black pulsating barrier that looked like *a network of blood vessels*.

Branches extending from the barrier were pierced into the bodies of each spectator and took blood—or rather, chi—from them.

Masamichi watched *the blood vessel network* in the barrier, where people fell one by one in an orderly fashion. It was as if the petals of a blooming flower were opening, and he saw chi energy being sent to the central spot behind the crowd.

"That…thing… Was it pierced into my body, too?"

"Yeah, but I already removed it. It's moving slowly, so I thought even you could avoid it if your third eye was open. I overestimated you."

Shino dismissed Masamichi wryly and then turned to stare at the hichiriki player who came into view behind the crowd.

The people slowly collapsing were like flower petals.

A man stood at the core of the flower, continuing to play the hichiriki while comfortably basking in the chi energy his barrier brought him from his audience. He…still looked young.

Straight, long, crimson hair, just like Masamichi saw on the poster.

Standing tall in a pure white suit, he looked divine.

Unlike Shino, he had a graceful yet somewhat fierce vibe.

"Is that person…Kagiroi?"

"That isn't a person. It's a specter. Like…me," Shino angrily whispered, "Unlike me, he's probably been living freely the past thousand years. I hate to admit it, but the difference in our power is overwhelming. I can't break this boundary. I can't repel him, either."

"What?!"

Masamichi was stunned. Even though he knew that no all-powerful being existed in the world, he always assumed that Shino could handle anything.

"Are you saying…? You're no match for Kagiroi?"

"Leave it to you to spell it out so clearly. At least for now, that's how things stand. I was a little overconfident. Or, rather, my anger corrupted my judgment. That's my mistake. Now, stay where you are. I'll try to pry open part of that barrier. Make a run for it when I do that."

"What…?!"

Not giving Masamichi a chance to argue, Shino slowly took a step, then another toward Kagiroi, avoiding the people who had fallen to the ground.

If I follow him, I'll probably get in his way. But…but…

Shino always spoke coldly, but he felt strongly that he was responsible for his servant's life. Knowing him, he would never involve Masamichi in something he'd miscalculated.

Shino's going to let me escape if it means getting himself killed by Kagiroi. But, Shino, I won't accept that. I just told you how happy I was to have met you.

Masamichi clenched his fists and put all his strength into his still somewhat wobbly legs.

Meanwhile, the last spectator had collapsed. Kagiroi stopped playing his hichiriki and gently removed his lips from the mouthpiece.

His deep, dark, jet-black eyes looked over Masamichi and then caught sight of Shino approaching.

"Oh? The two of you… Or rather, you. Your face looks familiar."

"As does yours to me. So, you've taken on the appearance of your first master, have you?"

Shino spoke with his usual confidence. He gave no hint of the fact that he was in danger. But Kagiroi didn't seem the least bit surprised and curved his too-red lips upward in a grin.

"Hmm… I didn't recognize you for a moment, since you look so modern. You're Tokifuyu Tatsumi's apparition. Was it 'Shino' that he called you? What an arrogant name, *Shino*—the lord of the wilderness."

"That's right."

"Ha-ha. I heard you were imprisoned in a jar because you angered your master. How wonderful that you are now free. But it's too late. Because of your absence, slaughtering your master was easier than breaking a baby's neck. He fell from that bridge over there and snapped his neck. *Snap*."

Kagiroi made a gesture of cracking the hichiriki he held in two.

"…You!"

Masamichi held his breath as he watched silver-colored chi energy released from Shino's broad back. It looked like flames of anger flaring up.

Kagiroi…really killed Tokifuyu. Oh, I get it. A specter can change his appearance. He can turn himself into a bee and attack an ox pulling a cart.

Masamichi finally understood the situation and felt a heavy thud in his heart.

Kagiroi looked over Shino from head to toe, as if to gauge his value, and chuckled.

"How pitiful. The many years of imprisonment have left you weak. I can't believe you dared to come before me like this. Oh, wait, did you come to beg my assistance to die so you can follow your master? Perhaps that human there is your payment to me for the trouble. How thoughtful of you."

"It was indeed my mistake to underestimate the difference in our mystical power, but I am not following my master. And that is my servant. I will not allow him to become food for you."

Masamichi's heart skipped a beat in joy at Shino's words. But those words seemed absolutely hilarious to Kagiroi.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. What a surprise. An unexpected feast has come to me. All I was doing was having a little pick-me-up meal before my concert. Whatever your intentions, that human's chi looks quite tasty. Hmm. Let me see. I suppose these others can be the appetizer, that small human I'll take as a side dish, and you will be the main dish. Yes, it appears I'll have a good meal tonight. You may be weakened, but it's been a while since I last ate a specter of your caliber. I can hardly wait."

Kagiroi flicked his long tongue to quickly lick his blood-colored lips. His eyes had narrowed and become crescent-shaped, and his gaze flitted between Shino and Masamichi.

"Now, who should I start with? Would it be better to let your servant see his master being eaten? The same way that you could only suck your thumb and watch Tokifuyu Tatsumi die?"

"Kagiroi. You…bastard…!"

As soon as he realized that Masamichi was Kagiroi's target, Shino formed his left hand into a knife and swung it sharply from the upper right to the left.

The silver chi he wore all over his body flew like a boomerang and tore a part of the barrier that pulsated eerily with a thud.

However, the torn *blood vessels* immediately fused, and the sliced hole became narrower.

"Masamichi, run!" Shino yelled, without looking back. Kagiroi twisted his lips in disapproval.

"Trying to be clever, are you? Well, he won't get away."

"I won't let you go near him."

Shino stood between them, blocking Kagiroi's path.

"Shino…!"

He's really going to use himself as a shield to let me go. Forget it, Shino. I don't want you to do that.

Tears welled up in Masamichi's eyes.

Finally, after a thousand years, Shino stood before the enemy who had killed his master, yet he had no way to avenge his death. Masamichi was painfully aware of that frustration after always being an inferior student, a dropout, and an outcast among his peers.

Even in the midst of that searing frustration, Shino was trying to protect his servant's life. Masamichi could never leave someone like that behind and take off by himself.

I'm scared. Of course I'm afraid, but it's more scary to run now. I'm much more afraid…of being separated from Shino.

"Masamichi! I'm telling you to run! Quickly!" Shino raised his voice, frustrated to see that Masamichi hadn't budged.

The sharp voice that seemed to strike straight into his eardrums was rather like the sound of a pistol announcing the start of the event for Masamichi.

His still-weak body was quickly filled with the chi that Shino had given him earlier. He could see the golden chi spurting out from his skin and surrounding his body.

I'm not going to run! For once, I'm definitely not going to run!

I'm going to protect Shino.

Shino would either snicker or be furious if he heard that. But Masamichi was full of that grand resolve and began to run—not outside the barrier that was starting to close, but toward Shino.

"Masamichi?!"

"I'm giving you back what you gave me! I'll give you everything I have. So do something! We'll get away together!"

He embraced Shino, who looked stunned, and touched his lips to Shino's. It was probably more accurate to say he bit into the other man's lips.

Having never kissed anyone of his own accord, Masamichi frantically pressed his lips to Shino's. Shino's body tensed for a moment, but then he clutched Masamichi tightly.

With Shino now devouring his lips, Masamichi felt the chi flow from his body into the specter.

It was nothing like moments earlier. The feeling of weakness that overcame him was intense. But he wasn't worried, because Shino was holding him tightly.

"Hah! What difference does it make if you suck on that human? You will never measure up to me, Shino."

"Don't say my name like we're friends. My…servant believes in me. Then I shall have faith in my master as well. That is how the world should be."

With one arm holding his limp servant, Shino used his other hand to dig into his pants pocket. He pulled out a small item wrapped in a gauze towel, which he had dug out of the dirt in a hedge outside an apartment building earlier in the day.

He unraveled the towel, picked out a small, flat item that was still covered with mud, held it high, and called out to the sky in a sharp voice, "Tokifuyu! I don't know why you left this for me, but for once, make up for your betrayal!"

Kagiroi laughed out loud.

"What the hell? Now you're going to depend on your dead master? I don't think he's going to help. What good could a spiritual medium dead for a thousand years do? You really are funny, Shino. It'll be a shame to eat you. But it might be a bit of a nuisance to let you live, I think." Kagiroi held his hichiriki in his right hand, aimed its mouth toward Shino, and said, "Okay, time for dinner. Thanks to that servant of yours, I can savor the chi of two individuals at once. Now, where should I start sucking…?"

Oh, no… I couldn't protect Shino. I guess it was to be expected… I'm sorry, Shino.

Masamichi could hardly keep his eyes open at that point, and he apologized to Shino in his mind as he braced himself. This time, he

was really going to die. But he didn't feel as empty as he did before, because he was with Shino.

But the next moment—

—Masamichi heard a tremendous cracking sound that seemed to tear through the earth, and then he was enveloped by an extraordinary light. Even with his eyes closed, his retinas were scorched white, and his entire consciousness seemed to have been blown away.

Wh—…? What was that?

He thought he heard Kagiroi screaming. But…that was when his consciousness faded entirely.

"Hey. Why don't you get up already? Breakfast is almost over."

"Huh?! Oh, u-um, right. Good morning… Huh?" Awakened by Shino's familiar voice, Masamichi tried to get himself up in bed but was immediately struck by vertigo and his head sunk into the soft pillow again. "Ngh. I feel dizzy…"

"Idiot. It's because you poured all your chi into me. Of course you won't recover after a single night's sleep."

Shino sat on Masamichi's bed, looking as cool and poised as usual, and Masamichi was totally confused.

"Huh?! What? Was last night a dream? It couldn't have been, because I'm weak all over. Oh, so…did we manage to get away from Kagiroi? How?"

Shino spread the morning paper he was carrying and wordlessly showed Masamichi an article.

The headline read, GAGAKU MUSICIAN KAGIROI CANCELS TODAY'S CONCERT DUE TO INJURY.

Surprised, Masamichi glanced back and forth between the article and Shino.

"Don't tell me you beat Kagiroi?"

"I told you I can't do that as I am now," Shino said casually as he tossed the paper on his bed, reached for an item on the bedside table, and showed it to Masamichi.

Unlike the day before, the soil had been removed, but Masamichi couldn't immediately tell what it was.

"It's flat… A piece of wood?"

"It's a comb," Shino said in a low voice, his eyes downcast, with a pained look on his face. "Tokifuyu bought it for me one day long ago. When he sealed me in the jar, he erected a shrine on top of it. This is why the shrine was called *Comb Shrine*. I thought it had been long lost, but Tokifuyu must have put some curse on it. It survived with me for a thousand years, and through the repeated construction work at the site, it was lost in the soil."

"You're saying this is a thousand-year-old comb?"

"Yeah. It's chipped considerably, but knowing Tokifuyu, I had a hunch he might have done something to it and applied our mystical power to it… Then a gigantic thunderbolt struck Kagiroi on the head. He must have let down his guard, thinking I was no competition for him. I grabbed you and ran when he went down."

"Kagiroi isn't dead, is he? Won't he come after us?"

"We're okay for now. But that doesn't mean the connection between us and him has been severed. We'll probably have to fight him again someday, but at least on this occasion, Tokifuyu saved us."

Masamichi stared at the battered and worn-out comb in disbelief.

"Is that comb sort of like…a weapon that Tokifuyu prepared for you?"

"I don't know if he did it for me or for himself. Either way, it proved useful. I can give him a little credit for it. The lightning hit the riverbed by the Kamo River so hard that much of the grass burned. Kagiroi shouldn't be able to move for a while. I got a little scorched, too."

Masamichi started laughing when he noticed that, though Shino spoke with a straight face, the specter's hair was a little burned and frizzy.

"Aw man, Shino. Why do you have to tell me that when we're having a serious talk like this…? Oh, but wait." He touched his hair

and face, then looked up at Shino's grumpy mug. "I'm not burned at all. Does that mean you protected me…?"

"Shut up. There's no need to speculate."

"But! I want to thank you, at least."

"I may be the one who should be thanking you."

"What?!"

Embarrassed to the limit, Shino sternly said, "If you hadn't pushed your chi on me, I wouldn't have remembered Tokifuyu's… comb. My chi alone may not have been enough to cause that lightning. It's a slight bit of gratitude, but you can have it."

He cut himself off there, then suddenly grabbed Masamichi by the chin. Masamichi yelped in pain.

"Oww… This is your way of showing gratitude to me?"

"Idiot. That wasn't it. Here… I'll give you a bit of it."

Shino then leaned his upper body toward Masamichi. He touched his lips much more gently to Masamichi's than he had the night before, although his were still as cold as ice.

Oh…I knew it. I don't mind this at all… I…

Masamichi obediently accepted the action. The chi that flowed in from Shino was cold but strong, and it ran through every millimeter of Masamichi's body.

I wanted to tell him last night that I might be developing feelings for him, but maybe he already knows that.

Somehow, he didn't want to put that into words just then. Instead of voicing it, he willed the thought into the palms of his hands as he wrapped his arms around Shino's back…

EPILOGUE

Masamichi took two fifty-yen coins from his wallet and gently slipped them into the offering box in front of him.

He chose fifty-yen coins because, according to his father, five-yen coins were too cheap to wish for good fortune, so he had to at least offer fifty-yen coins. As for carefully slipping them into the box, he was following his grandmother's words, never to handle money roughly.

Next, he quietly pulled the ropes hanging above the offering box, discreetly rang the large bell overhead, bowed twice, clapped twice, clasped his hands together, made a wish, lowered his hands, and then bowed again.

Masamichi was following the instructions the adults around him had taught him. Shino was frowning next to him, saying with his entire being that this was nonsense as he glanced around the worship hall.

Masamichi saw Shino when he raised his head, and the expression on the specter's face said, "Ridiculous."

"I know that specters don't have a habit of greeting people, but don't you even visit shrines and temples? We've been visiting them since we arrived in Kyoto, and not once have you gone to pay your respects."

Then Shino said to Masamichi in a blatantly mocking tone, "I've agreed to take on this pitifully human appearance. However, I'm not low enough to bow to Buddha and the gods to ask for a favor."

"I knew you'd say that!" Masamichi chuckled and glanced toward the closed door to the worship hall. "You're really serious like that.

No one really counts on it when they pray to God for something."

Shino furrowed his shapely brow.

"But you paid for your wish just now."

"That's like a small token of my appreciation to God for listening to me. That's about all. It's too small an amount to have God grant me my wish."

"Is that how it is? Are you saying you're satisfied to say what you want out loud?"

The straightforward question took Masamichi aback. He thought it over a minute, then nodded.

"Well, yeah. Of course, I'll be glad if my wish comes true, and I might shout in joy, saying God gave me what I asked for. But basically, I don't expect that kind of thing, though…"

"Yeah?"

"When I stand here, I think seriously about what I most want to ask God or Buddha. It's like a chance to understand my mind more clearly."

"To make clear your heart's desire?"

"Maybe not to that extent, but things I'd like to have come true in the near future."

"Hmm. You have a habit of worrying endlessly about trivial matters, and if that's the case, then there may be some meaning to your shrine visits, and it's only natural that you would give God some change in gratitude."

"'Give God some change'…? Hey, we're talking about offerings to God! Show a little more respect."

Masamichi rebuked him with a bitter smile, but Shino didn't get mad at him for being cocky. Instead, he smiled wickedly and said, "Anyway, you would have to make a wish at this particular shrine. What did you wish for?"

"Huh?"

Masamichi looked lost.

On the day of their departure from Kyoto, Masamichi had spent the morning with Shino as he visited various antique stores whose

owners had been close to Daizou, Bougyoudou's previous owner.

Masamichi had been deeply moved. Shino had put on a suit, took gifts to the people he saw, and greeted them politely in formal Japanese speech, which he never used in his everyday life.

"By maintaining a network of contacts, we can trade goods with each other and exchange useful information. The more contacts I have, the better. It's simple if greetings and gifts are all it takes to maintain ties," Shino had said offhandedly, but Masamichi knew him. His actions probably stemmed from the gratitude he felt for Daizou, who treated him like a son and even left him his store.

Masamichi had known Shino for only six months, but they lived under the same roof, and the young man was certain that he was right.

Once Shino had finished his visits, Masamichi said he wanted to visit a shrine or temple for proper worship.

"Were you that religious?" Shino had asked suspiciously.

"Kyoto is like a city of temples and shrines. I'd feel uncomfortable if I didn't pay a visit to one of them," Masamichi had said.

"I figured it would be something like that," Shino had responded coldly, pulling back his shoulders, though he'd still gone to a nearby shrine with Masamichi.

"Come to think of it, we came without knowing anything about the deity enshrined here. But it's okay to make any wish at a shrine, right?"

Shino glanced at the worship hall quickly and said, in a tone that sounded commonsensical, "Even gods and Buddha have their strengths and weaknesses."

"They do? Then what's the specialty of the god enshrined here…?"

"The main deities at this place are Emperor Sutoku, Oomononushi no Kami, and Minamoto no Yorimasa. In simple terms, their divine virtues are severing connections and arranging marriages."

"Really?!"

Shino pointed to the left.

"You saw that stone monument over there, didn't you?"

Masamichi looked in the direction he indicated and nodded.

"Oh, it's a stone monument. I couldn't tell because of all the sticky talismans people have put on top of it. I thought it was a funny shaped rock with a hole in the middle."

"That's a stone monument for severing connections and arranging marriages. People pray, write their wishes on talismans… pieces of paper, then walk through the hole in the middle, from front to back, then again from back to front, and finally paste their talismans on the monument."

"…What happens then?"

"Bad ties are severed, and good ones are formed."

"Wow!"

As Masamichi stood looking impressed, Shino said, sounding appalled, "You should know that much before you come here."

"There's nothing I can say to that…but…severing bad ties and forming good ones, huh…?"

As Masamichi mumbled the words to himself, Shino turned up the corners of his mouth and looked at him with a mocking smile.

"Hey. Don't think that you can escape from me by simply wishing to God, servant."

Masamichi quickly shook his head and waved his hands in denial.

"That's not what I want! Never in these six months have I wanted to run away from you."

"…Oh, you haven't?"

"It's true."

"You think the life of a servant suits you?"

"That isn't what I'm saying…but I've learned a lot from you. You have not only saved my life, but you have also taken care of me in every possible way. I want to repay the favor, even if it's just a little bit. So…um…"

"What?"

"I can only be useful to you in really small ways, so it will take me quite a while to return the favor. So…please let me stay with you. I hope you won't mind that."

Masamichi gave Shino a polite bow, and Shino gave him an indescribable look.

An expression that could be described as flabbergasted, embarrassed, or amused appeared on Shino's face. But unfortunately, it was gone by the time Masamichi raised his head.

"It's too presumptuous of you to think that you could do such a thing as repay me, but I'll accept that you have the right attitude. So, then, you have no use for that monument, is that right?"

Masamichi nodded.

"No! None at all!"

"All right. Then we're leaving. I don't need to stay in a place like this where human greed and bitterness swirl about."

Shino was already walking away before finishing his sentence.

"Oh, wait. Wait!" Because Shino was tall and long-legged, Masamichi had to run to catch up. He made his way under the stone torii gate, a little out of breath, and asked, "Are you done with your errands? Are we going to go home now?"

Shino slowed down a little and said, "Well. We've come all the way to Kyoto. We can have lunch in the Gion area before heading home."

Relieved that they were finally walking at a normal speed, Masamichi put his hand against his belly and smiled shyly.

"That sounds great. My stomach has actually been growling for a while. What are we going to have? My impression of restaurants in Gion is that they're awfully expensive. Is that okay?"

"That doesn't always seem to be the case. There's an udon noodle shop that Daizou said he sometimes stopped by on his business trips to Kyoto. We can go there."

Masamichi smiled.

He sensed that the previous owner and his wife were rooted deep in his heart…and despite all his talk, he genuinely adored

them.

"Wonderful! I hear udon noodles in Kansai are delicious. I'll have to try the classic *kitsune* udon, topped with a sweet and savory deep-fried *aburaage* tofu."

Shino let his gaze wander a little, as if searching for a memory.

"No. Daizou said he always ordered the *udon with curry sauce, topped with cheese and meat*. Yoriko was unusually harsh when she criticized him about that, saying it was terribly intense."

"Udon with curry sauce, topped with cheese and meat?!" Surprised by the unexpected information, Masamichi's eyes went wide. "It's kind of different from my image of Kyoto."

"You can't associate a place with a single image…"

"It would annoy the people here, wouldn't it? People from all walks of life live with an array of lifestyles. Hey, I'm starting to get hungrier. I can hardly wait to taste this udon with curry sauce, topped with cheese and meat!"

"…I'm not looking forward to it *that* much," Shino said indifferently, then continued walking at a brisk pace. Then he suddenly asked the young man a question. "If you didn't wish for anything to do with severing ties or matchmaking, then what *did* you wish for?"

"Huh?!" Not expecting Shino to be interested in his wish, Masamichi yelped in surprise, then responded with a slightly mischievous look on his face. "I'm not saying."

"…What?"

"I'll tell you one day if it comes true in any small way. I've heard before that a wish won't come true if you tell someone about it."

"You're a lowly servant. How dare you hide something from your master?"

Despite the condemning words, Shino's face showed that he wasn't particularly worried about it.

"Someday! I'll tell you all about it if it comes true, so let's consider it as postponing my answer."

"Humans die quickly. Tell me while you're still alive."

"Okaaay."

Masamichi was touched that he could have this kind of lighthearted banter with Shino, which was something he had never even imagined when they first met. Masamichi felt the pleasant autumn breeze on his cheeks, as the two of them walked away, shoulder to shoulder…

This book is a completely revised and retitled paperback edition of *Him, a Specter, and Me, a Servant*, originally published by Az Novels, East Press, in September 2004.

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink