

Summerworld



# SummerWORLD

Serdar Yegulalp

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For Mike Morgan

*The statue has eyes,  
and its tears drip silently down*





## CHAPTER 1: aMLUX In Ikebukuro

THE OUTSIDE OF the note-card envelope bore a postmark from one week ago, and the return address of a man who had been dead for three years.

*To: Dr. Hirofumi Gô  
Ogikubo, Suginami  
Tokyo 168, Japan*

*It's a shame we haven't been able to see each other, but life interferes with everything we want from it anyway. Still, I've got some vacation time coming to me, and I thought I'd spend it at a resort in Echino, from the 23rd through the 27th. If you're so inclined, join me, and I can fill you in on everything that's happened since we last spoke. It'll be well worth it.*

—Masuda Akita

Hirofumi Gô stood at his apartment's door for minutes on end with the note-card in his hand, reading and re-reading the words as if expecting them to change. The note-card had been mixed in with the usual day's mail—the piles of bills, neighborhood advertising flyers and a notice printed on thick paper by the owners of the apartment complex about new trash-sorting regulations going into effect.

The handwriting was unquestionably Masuda's. That man—tall, wiry, nervous, broad smile, twenty-eight years old at his death—had written Gô at least fifty letters of one kind or another, all long-hand, all on the same gridded pale blue paper. He had come to Tokyo from Nagoya, and only forced himself to see a doctor after spending nearly a solid month in his apartment, hiding under his bedding and unable to even consider speaking to another human being. *I don't like to ask for help from anyone, he'd said, but now I*

*don't know how to do anything except ask for help. So help me, please.* To that Gô had replied: *I'll help you. I promise.*

And he had helped him. For two years he worked with Masuda to keep him from turning his back completely on the world. The letters Masuda had written plotted the whole arc of his suffering: from a low to a high and then back to another low that pinned him down and refused to let him up again. One day Masuda had sent Gô a terse note folded into the kind of envelope typically used for sending funerary money: *Please take heart in knowing that you are not responsible. You are a good man, but I am anything but; in fact, I am not much of anything at all.* Then Masuda had rented a car, driven up into the mountains, and plowed through a guardrail at 160 kilometers per hour.

Gô sat down at the kitchen table, only a few feet from the front door, and resisted the urge to mash the note into a tiny pellet and drop it into the trash. The postmark didn't have to mean anything, he told himself. Masuda could have arranged for the letter to be mailed before his death. Or it was a prank in the most wretched of taste, engineered by whoever would think such a thing funny or worthwhile.

He re-folded the note, inserted it into the inner pocket of his suit jacket, straightened his sleeves and stepped outside. As outlandish as this is, he thought, it shouldn't deter me. I made a promise to meet someone today and I'm not about to quit just because of an arbitrary distraction. That seemed the best way to think about this harsh reminder of the first of many failings: *arbitrary*. It wasn't really his fault.

The walk from Gô's apartment to the JR Chuo rail line wasn't more than a few minutes, but he went the long way around the block when he looked at his watch and realized he was really in no hurry after all. He would have to ride the line all the way to the end, to the Ikebukuro station, but the length of the train ride wouldn't put him behind schedule. He could take his time and savor the warming April air, but once he was underground and in the train he would no longer have that distraction; he would once again be forced to sit in the company of his own thoughts.

Once the train swept into the station and he settled into one of the seats, he slid his hand back into his suit jacket, pulled out the note and spread it across his thigh. Masuda's last note before this one—assuming this one was from him at all, he told himself—had

been the thing that caused the ground to split open under him and swallow him. A couple of months after Masuda's death, Gô realized he'd lost interest in his work. The patients that continued to come to him no longer seemed like people whom he could help; they felt like liars who were masquerading as troubled people for the sake of getting aid they didn't really need. If I can't see them as anything else, he told himself, then I have no business trying to "help" them. He dissolved his private practice and after some scratching around took a job in the human-resources division of a software company. It was comfortably boring work, and its wall of paperwork insulated him from having to think of the people as *people*. They—and him—were simply interchangeable components in a larger machine. They would be left alone to do their respective jobs.

He folded the note back up, worried that the sweat from his palm might cause the ink to bleed. At the other end of this train ride, and approaching fast, was a restaurant where he had first met the woman he had once called his wife. She's probably already there waiting for me, he thought, and we're going to sit down and eat, and then she's going to tell me that she's finally leaving for Australia. Just as I feared she would be.

As Gô stepped out of the Ikebukuro station and breathed in more of the warm April air, he turned in place and blinked at the huge Toyota Amlux building, with its curious illuminated dome—more like an arch—at the top. The arch reminded him of the bump in the middle of the Buddha's forehead in pictures of him: whatever the context, that thing always caught his eye more than anything else.

His stomach twinged; he realized that he had been so distracted by the mail earlier that he had not eaten anything at all that morning. I'm hungrier than I anticipated, he thought. Even if today is nothing but bad news, I should still eat as much as I can. I'll need it.

The restaurant was a conveyor-belt sushi shop, one of so many others like it but with particularly good food and located only a couple of blocks from the train station. Shizuka was already there, one shoe up on the base of a streetlamp as she tugged at its straps. She was tall and had a natural elegance to her, but she had a habit of doing things that didn't seem to mesh with her elegance at all—like putting one foot up like that and hobbling around on the other one in such a clumsy way. She didn't seem to mind that she had been

seen in such a state, either. She had had the same air of selflessness about her in just about every circumstance Gô could remember: coming out of the shower with no towel on, stepping into a car and almost clocking her head, dropping armloads of groceries all over the kitchen table.

“It’s good seeing you,” Gô said.

“Let’s go inside, I’m starved.” Shizuka’s smile was small but happy. “You’re actually very early. I was thinking about walking over to Junkudo and killing some time there before you were supposed to show up.”

Junkudo, the giant, nine-story bookstore she’d mentioned, was about half a block up from where they stood. On any other day Gô would have been happy to spend an hour or more in there, but right now everything in front of him had narrowed down to the sushi restaurant and the disappointment he was sure was waiting for him inside. After what happens in here I’m sure I definitely won’t be in the mood for reading, he thought.

They found seats near the back, where the conveyor belt came out of the wall and presented them with what was ostensibly the freshest food first. Gô took the seat closest to the curtained hole over the belt and pretended the sight of the dishes passing him by was wholly absorbing.

“You’re still with that software company?” she asked.

He tilted his head. “I’ve got no reason to leave,” he said. “It’s nothing like private practice, of course. But even just six years of private practice showed me that it was . . . well, it wasn’t something I could continue to do sincerely.”

“I always thought you hated private practice from the beginning.”

“What makes you say that?” Gô reached for a plate of eel, but was looking at her and wound up picking up roe instead. He didn’t like roe, but he set the dish down in front of himself anyway.

“Whenever you talked about it,” she said, “it always sounded like something you would be happy to walk away from at any time. You always sounded like it was something you were ready to ditch at a moment’s notice. ‘Maybe someday I’ll let it go and do something else,’ you said.”

“I may have said that a few times early on. I don’t think I ever said that consistently.”

"I don't think you liked the people you had as patients, either. I always wondered about that, and we talked about it at one point. You had to keep in business, so you *had* to have some people coming in that you just didn't like. I didn't think you could just ignore those feelings."

"I had to be professional about it."

You had to be professional about it, he told himself, but you left anyway. He looked at the collection of plates in front of her that she'd taken off the belt. Octopus, eel, roe, tuna . . . what struck Gô most about this assortment was how it might as well have been put there by someone else. Before, she had eaten almost nothing but fatty tuna and loved it; now, it seemed, she was willing to put anything in front of herself and eat it because she simply didn't care. Like him, a meal had become something you just fueled yourself with.

They had met while they were both still students. He had liked her calm sincerity, her elegance, and also the way her elegance could fall away suddenly and unpretentiously. She could lick away grains of rice from her fingers and not seem ill-mannered. They had eaten at that same restaurant many more times, shared an apartment for a time, shared a bed, exchanged vows. Then he had opened his private practice and in some ways that had been the beginning of the end. They glumly admitted defeat sometime after Masuda's suicide; there just seemed no reason to call themselves husband and wife if neither of them felt inclined to keep up the pretense. And now somehow they had ended up sitting knee-to-knee like this, with her preparing to go overseas and him resigned to work that was a bastardization of his original duty.

"Did you hear back from Monash?" That was the university in Australia where she had been preparing to do her residency.

"I'm leaving in July," she said.

There; it was final now. It's not as if this is a real loss, he told himself; things had fallen apart for keeps years before. But such thoughts weren't enough to stave off the bruising feeling her words inflicted on him. If the door hadn't really been closed before, it was now completely closed, and the bolt had been snapped into place.

"I'm going to be sorry to see you go," he said, and instantly regretted it.

"Why?" She turned to look at him sidelong, a piece of eel half-way to her mouth.

“I *have* missed you.” Go on, he thought; you’re this far in, you might as well go all the way off the end of the dock. “I’ve thought about the way all of this came about, and there was so much more I could have done, and didn’t do . . .” He looked down at his food, so much of it still untouched. Outside, earlier, he had thought about how his world was going to narrow down to the inside of this restaurant, and now it had narrowed down even more cruelly and tightly than that—now it was nothing but the plates in front of him and the square inches of counter space he had to lean his elbow against. “I don’t know why I let it all slide like that. It just seemed so easy to get tired, to get overwhelmed. And then after Mr. Akita died, I thought, well, that’s my last mistake, isn’t it? After having messed things up with you, that is.” Mr. Akita, he thought. Not *Masuda*. Not anymore.

He finally managed to look back at her. For all of the expertise he believed he had with people and their feelings, the expression on her face was wholly undecipherable to him. It filled him with a ghastly chill.

“Please don’t apologize for anything,” she said, looking down at her plate and placing her chopsticks next to it.

She’s not interested in eating anymore either, is she, he thought.

“It’s not wrong for you to be sorry,” she went on. “It’s not as if I don’t want to hear that. It’s . . .” She smiled, but at the same time the smile didn’t imbue Gô with the same warmth that it had whenever she had smiled at him from just beyond the edge of their bed-sheets. This was a stranger’s smile. “Even if you apologize to me, Hirofumi, I’m not sure there’s anything I can do anymore. I want you to be happy if you can. I just don’t think there’s anything I can do to make that happen.”

So you doubt yourself as much as I do, he thought. Then we probably deserve each other anyway, don’t we?

“I’m going to keep eating,” she said. “This is going to be my big meal for the day, I think.”

That’s like her, though, he thought. When she would say things as much for herself as for the benefit of others around her. At least I know there’s some piece of her that I remember in there, even if I can never get to it again.

“I’ll do the same,” he said, nodding and turning around to face the conveyor belt again. Then, without quite knowing why, he

pulled out the note and its accompanying envelope and spread it on the counter between them.

“I almost forgot. I received this earlier today. I thought it was some kind of prank.”

Shizuka’s eyes widened when she saw the name on the envelope.

“You just got this?”

“Today.”

“Maybe he arranged to have it mailed after his death.”

“I thought the same thing, but I can’t imagine why he would want to do something like that.”

To hurt me, why else? he thought, then just as quickly dismissed the idea.

She read the text of the note and then looked back up at him. “Are you planning to go there?”

“I guess. I ought to find out what’s going on.”

It wasn’t the answer he had intended to give, but it seemed to make sense to her.

They ate some more in silence, and when it came time to pay the bill she slid thousand-yen bills out of her wallet and fanned them like playing cards.

Standing next to her at the register, he felt words rising up out of him again, unbidden: “Maybe we could see each other again before you leave?”

She paused with her hand on the little pile of change she’d received for her five-thousand yen bill.

“Call me after you come back from your trip,” she said, and when she turned to face him she did have a more genuine smile for him, reserved as it was. “I ought to know better by then how hectic things will be.” That was how so many things in life seemed to be right now: neither yes, nor no, just sort of hanging there.

Gô watched her walk away down the street towards the bookstore, and felt something like resentment shoot through him. Shizuka wouldn’t have been able to go into a bookstore if she was feeling bad, he thought. She’s like me; she can’t enjoy something like that if there’s a cloud hanging over her.

But that was the Shizuka from years ago. The person who sat next to me and gobbled down all that sushi wasn’t the same person I married. And the person I married isn’t the same girl I sat down with the first time in there. And now the person I see walking away

from me down the block isn't the person I was just talking to. She's now a different person who can just walk away from me and not feel all that heartbroken. Maybe I'm just as inscrutable to her in my own way, aren't I?

What the hell had happened to everything?

He turned and began to walk back up the block towards the train station. If memory served there was another little place not far from here that he'd spend endless hours in as a student, around the same time he'd met Shizuka. It was a little hole-in-the-wall basement coffee shop that had a ragged interior with décor still left over from the mid-Seventies, with clouds of cigarette smoke and students curled up around tables cramming for exams. He had spent many a night in there, drinking coffee and ordering toast and boiled eggs every couple of hours to avoid his roommate, a near-psychotic self-proclaimed Communist who smoked dismaying amounts of pot and set fire to the mail (and, occasionally, set fire to the mail to smoke dismaying amounts of pot). I ought to laugh at that memory, he told himself; I need to laugh at something right now.

Gô was tempted to walk back to the coffee shop and see if it was still there, crawl back into its dark interior and use its presence to forcibly restore a connection to a past that felt more and more like it had simply never existed anymore.

No, I need to move forward, he thought. I'm no longer the man who sat in there for hours at a stretch trying to get caught up on reading; I'm not even the man who just now went out for sushi with my ex-wife. I'm something else.

He turned once more and found the steps back into the train station.

There was no problem with taking a day off, even two: he had apparently earned a good deal of paid time off with his job and not used any of it. Going out with co-workers and getting drunk was about as social as things got, and there was no one he had ever needed to take a whole day to visit. Not until now.

In the back of his closet he found an old airline bag that had somehow fallen into his possession; he had vague memories of one of Shizuka's friends leaving it there by mistake. It was a hideous, tacky shade of blue, but he wasn't going to need it for very long. He put a single change of clothes into it, just enough toiletries for a night's stay. If this turned out to be some kind of hoax in bad taste, he would excoriate whoever was responsible and then go home. But

if there was something else going on, he'd stay the night, although no more than that.

The train ride to Echino was at least two and a half hours from the heart of Tokyo, so he set his alarm early and fell asleep far more easily than he anticipated he would. When he had been fresh out of college he had once briefly considered becoming a Buddhist acolyte. That had never happened, but he did remember many things that had been passed along to him during that time. One of them he now took to heart without trying: *When you sleep, sleep as though you would never wake up. When you wake, rise from your bed as if you are discarding an old pair of shoes.* Right now, any piece of advice that allowed him to just keep moving forward made sense.

He was up before dawn and out of the apartment just as the sun was peeking between the buildings. There was something about Tokyo in an early spring morning that made it seem wistful and gentle, not at all like a megalopolis of millions; even the few people he was jostling against on the train just seemed to be tiredly happy to share the same space for a bit. And once on board the train to Echino itself, he let his head nod against the window and found the sunny morning landscapes of trees-electric-wires-crossing-signs-fences-buildings-lampposts lull him back into a dozing state. Someone a seat behind him was eating rice crackers, and their faintly spicy scent reminded him of something, but not something he could find any real memory of. Maybe it had never existed, he thought, and I just want there to be something.

"Echino Station," the announcer blared over the p.a.

Gô sat up and clutched the overnight bag to his chest, then almost panicked when he realized it wasn't in his arms anymore. No, he had quite sensibly stowed the bag in the overhead rack rather than use up the seat next to him; he jumped to his feet, pulled the bag down, and stepped out onto the shaded platform. The train clacked away, seemingly only seconds after he had stepped clear of it, and it took moments after that for the dull roaring of the train that had filled his ears for almost two hours to fall away as well.

When it finally did fall away, it was replaced with a sound that he would not have expected to hear for months yet: the summery hissing and chittering of insects, coming from all sides at once. It was also warm, far warmer here than it had been in Tokyo, despite him having ridden a fair ways north and east. He shrugged off his

jacket, as its dark and heavy material was already drawing out a layer of sweat from his back and shoulders.

The station signboard read *Echino*, all right, but it looked like it had been built in the Forties and never replaced. Its wood frame was peeling and splitting from countless cycles of rain and sun, and the typeface used for the lettering (only kanji, no Roman characters) was also of a kind he hadn't seen used widely for decades. Weeds shot up from cracks around the edges of one of the signpost's feet. The rest of the station seemed to be in similarly archaic disrepair: the platform itself, he noticed, was wood and not concrete, and the steps leading down to the unpaved road beyond were also splitting badly.

Maybe they keep all of it like this, he thought, to make it feel all the more rustic and homely. They probably catered to a great many retirees or something, people with all this fond nostalgia about before the war. Something like that. He thought back to the little underground student café, with its rotting yakuza-movie posters and peeling ceiling plaster. If that place still existed, most of the kids in there now would never have a reason to find the things in it nostalgic. But they'd go anyway, and forge a whole new kind of connection to all of it.

The little advertising card for the hot-spring that had been included with the note had a small map on the back. According to it, the entrance to the place was only a short walk up the road from the train station. There, at the far end of the road where it curved, was a torii—a gate painted a festive red, probably the entrance to the resort itself. Gô quickened his steps towards it and felt the sun make his scalp itch.



## CHAPTER 2: made GLORIOUS Summer

THE BUILDING PAST THE TORII seemed too small to be a hot-spring resort. It looked more like one of those little country roadside restaurants or teahouses, and the signboard and lanterns that dangled from its thatched eaves were more in line with a snack stand than anything bigger. False advertising, Gô thought. But it was too late to do anything about it; he was here, and it was the right day.

Right in front of the steps up to the building's porch was a stream—at least deep enough for him to stand up in, from the look of it, and spanned by a rough wooden bridge that didn't look like it was in any better shape than the train platform had been. Gô was equally loathe to walk across it or try and wade through the stream. In the end he decided the bridge was probably the less problematic of the two choices, and he hoisted his airline bag over his shoulder and started walking.

He was less than halfway across the bridge before one of the boards gave way with a grinding snap. He fell against the board in front of him, and it too snapped in half, dropping him face-first into the water. The bag leapt from his fingers as he pitched forward and landed on the porch of the building in front of him with a muffled splintering sound.

The water was indeed deep enough for him to be completely immersed once he'd fallen into it, and its sandy bottom gave unpleasantly under his hands as he pushed himself back to his feet. His hair was fashionably long, even for a man in his forties—after all, if a prime minister of the country could get away with such a look at *his* age, why not him?—but the water plastered it down unevenly on all sides of his head. Probably makes me look like a bad parody of an apparition from a horror movie, he thought.

When he wiped his hair back from his eyes, he could see his bag lying on its side right in front of the sliding door. The bottom of it was wet, and a stain was beginning to spread out underneath it—not from the stream he'd just fallen into, but probably from the now-shattered bottle of aftershave inside the bag. Wonderful, he

thought, and waded up and out of the stream to the side of the bridge nearest the building. The inside of his mouth was foul; he'd gulped down some of the algae-ridden water by mistake, and the taste of it painted his mouth and soured his stomach.

He bent down to claim his bag and the paper-paned door to the building slid back, revealing a pair of white-socked feet. The girl now standing there looked like she was maybe in her early teens, dressed in short trousers and a kimono with the sleeves tied back and her hair yanked back into a thick, bristly ponytail. Evidently she had been cooking; she had a kitchen knife in one hand which was wet and had bits of green onion sticking to it.

"You're a mess!" she exclaimed.

So like a child, Gô thought, to just blurt out the obvious. More like she was affirming it to herself than anyone else.

"That bridge—" Gô pointed back over his shoulder. "It's dangerous. I just now fell through it."

"Oh, good grief . . ." The girl tilted not just her head but her whole body to one side to look at the broken boards. Her face fell—not so much in sadness or empathy as in annoyance. "And to think I had it fixed not all that long ago."

She turned her attention back to him and bowed with her hands pressed tightly together between her knees. "Come on inside! I was getting today's hot-pot ready, but give me a moment and I can help you. I've got room in the back where you can change into something."

". . . I think my clothes are ruined."

Gô stepped inside and knelt down next to the door to unzip the bag and look inside. Sure enough, the bottle of aftershave had shattered, pickling his change of clothing and salting everything with broken glass. And I bet my electric razor's ruined, too, he thought. For some asinine reason this particular brand of aftershave, the only one that didn't dry out his skin horribly, only came in glass bottles.

The girl peered down into the bag from over his shoulder with wide eyes. "Say, I bet I've got something that you could put on that would fit you nicely. Let me show you!"

"If it's no trouble . . ."

"No trouble at all! Come on into the back."

She led him around the counter. Behind it, a large pot bubbled over a propane stove; the scents wafting out from just under the wooden lid made Gô's stomach fold in on itself in anticipation. I

never did eat anything before I left the apartment, he thought. Just like the day before. Idiot!

The back room was a five-and-a-half-mat space—probably a guestroom, since there was a pile of clean bedding visible in the half-open closet. Standing against one wall was a rack with a white kimono draped over it, an outfit in a design that hadn't been part of everyday dress for centuries. The way the shoulders of the outer jacket hung open at the tops, for instance, or the curious way the collar had been stitched . . . this was something you wore on ceremony, or if you were on a stage. Gô stepped in closer and realized it was chased with a fragile and lovely-looking cross-hatching pattern of off-white silk thread that was only visible when the light hit it in just the right way.

If this is what she's offering me to wear, he thought, I wouldn't mind being seen in it at all. But it's got to be quite valuable.

"There we are," she grinned, gesturing to the outfit Gô had been ogling.

"That?—Are you positive?"

"Completely. And now I, Utsumaru, will have lunch ready before long. Change and come back into the front of the shop for a meal on the house!"

She bowed, took one step backwards, and slid the door shut.

Utsumaru is a boy's name, Gô thought, as he took off his sodden jacket. There was no place to put it, or the rest of his wet clothes; he gave up and simply draped them across the mats to one side. But there was a towel in the adjoining bathroom (with an old-style squat toilet, its bowl streaked with hard-water stains), and he used it to dry off as best he could before dressing himself.

It felt strange to surround himself with so many layers of silk—like eating a piece of cheesecake meant for someone else, he thought. The outfit came with everything: a *fundoshi*, one of those narrow loincloths that was a rite of passage all its own to try and put on; a broad white outer sash; white split-toe socks as well. There was no mirror, but he dug through his bag anyway and found that his brush was at least useable even if it smelled of aftershave. He dragged it through his hair, and as he did this he saw two other things that had been lying on the floor under the clothes rack.

The first was a black cap—a boxy, vaguely pyramidal thing also made out of silk and chased with a design, and fitted with a string for his chin. The other was a sword in its scabbard. The curious

bend in the tail of the handle and the gentle curve of the weapon as a whole were both signs it was also a product of the same period as the costume. I'll wear the hat, he thought, if only to keep the hair out of my eyes, but that sword is not something for my hands. It was in good enough condition, and of good enough workmanship, that it probably belonged in a museum—if it was genuine, that is.

He slid the door back and managed to show a smile.

"Oh, you look so *dashing!*" Utsumaru laughed, bowing once again from behind the cutting board where she was dicing up a radish.

"Dashing," Gô echoed with a half-laugh, and held up his voluminous sleeves—like bags for holding clouds, he thought. "Where did this come from?"

"That? I've had it forever," she said dismissively, waving a hand. "I found it here when I moved in and took over this place."

"Along with the sword?"

"That was here, too. I actually don't think they're *that* old; I think the sword's a replica anyway. I mean, if it was that important, it wouldn't just be lying somewhere, right?"

Child's logic, Gô thought. No; actually, there were plenty of adults he had known who had used the same reasoning.

"And besides, I think it fits you wonderfully. But for now, have a seat and enjoy the house specialty of Shino-ya." She patted the counter in front of her and motioned for him to sit.

*It fits you wonderfully.* To him, the outfit felt loose and not especially well-fitting, but that might simply have been a mental prejudice on his part. He had worn an outfit only slightly less formal for his own wedding, and it had seemed equally baggy and strange on him then, too. But there was no way he was bothering with that sword, he told himself. He gathered up his leggings and sat on one of the several stools at the counter.

"Do you run this place all by yourself?" he said. It had only just then occurred to him that she seemed to be the only person there.

"All by myself," Utsumaru nodded. "And all the better for it, too. That way I don't have anyone leaning over my shoulder telling me what's what."

"Was that happening?"

"For a while." She lifted the hot-pot off the fire—broth and vegetables and a diced brick of tofu in a little cauldron—and set it down in front of him on a thick ceramic plate. Hot as it was, Gô sho-

veled it into his mouth with the provided ladle mere seconds later—and almost burned his tongue. Suddenly he was no longer thinking about a meal as being just something he put into his body to keep it running; the pleasure of eating it made his jaws tingle.

“I’m sorry,” he exhaled after a moment, seeing that Utsumaru was staring and grinning. She’s enjoying the effect her handiwork has on me, he thought—which was perfectly fine, after all. “I was going to say—who was doing the leaning over your shoulder?”

“Oh.” The smile left Utsumaru’s face and she returned her attention to cleaning up the cutting board. “Just some people I thought I was doing the right thing by trusting myself to. But it didn’t turn out that way at all.” She looked up at him from under her straight-hanging bangs. “I don’t even think I know your name, come to think of it.”

“Hirofumi Gô.” Somehow, while changing, he had remembered to keep his wallet on him, tucked into an inner fold of his kimono. From it he produced his card. “I was actually looking for someone else who told me he’d be staying here.”

“A friend or a patient?”

Gô remembered that his title was also printed on the card. He had kept the use of the title, even if he wasn’t really in a job that demanded it anymore—like a retired navy officer still going out in public wearing dress uniforms, he thought.

“A former patient,” he said after a moment. “I was . . . rather surprised that he got in touch with me at all, actually. Masuda Aki-ta’s his name.”

Utsumaru shook her head and put a bowl of jelly noodles down next to Gô’s main course. “You’re the first person to come through here in a couple of days,” she said, “so enjoy a little something extra on the house.”

“Isn’t this place supposed to be a hot-spring resort?” He looked in his wallet, but the advertising card for the place had gone missing. “That’s what he told me . . .”

“Hot-spring? No . . . It was a restaurant when I found it,” Utsumaru said, “after I left my—‘friends’—and decided to do something on my own. It was actually a *mess* when I came here,” and her voice brightened as she moved into that subject, “with holes in all the screens and the roof missing tiles and everything. I fixed it all myself. And I found that costume and that sword in the back, in a big chest, along with a bunch of other stuff. It was too big for me, so

I figured, ‘Well, maybe someone else will come along who can wear it!’ So I stuck it somewhere and aired it out every so often and now you’re here. Other than that, I run the place and every time a customer comes along I give them my full attention. It’s all I need, right here.”

This little house is her world, he thought. A house with only one room in it. Everything that did not absolutely have to be there—this little haven and the mythology she’d created for it—had simply been dropped. And no significant details about her “friends,” either.

“These friends—former,” Gô corrected himself, “do they ever come by here?”

“Oh, they know I’m here. They know better than to bother me. Mostly I’m not worth the trouble, I think. That’s about the way I’d want it.”

For several long minutes after that Gô’s hunger overrode everything else and he stuffed himself, but all the while he had one eye turned towards Utsumaru as she sponged off the countertops and removed the grill from the gas burner to clean under it as well. Despite being somewhat shabby, the place was clean. The propane burner itself looked like something that could have dated back to the Fifties but it was still in good repair, and its chrome sparkled when Utsumaru was finished with it. Contentment wrapped around Gô like a cloud.

His dipper hit the edge of the bowl, making a resounding *clonk*. Like the wooden clapper used to signal the beginning and end of prayer among acolytes, he thought.

He looked up, drawing in his breath sharply. Utsumaru’s back was to him as she wiped sticky dust from the label of a soy-sauce bottle.

How do I know *she* didn’t send that letter? he told himself.

The letter was in his wallet, too, folded into a small square. He had kept it with him during his tumble in the water and his heart sank when he saw darkened stains as he unfolded it. But it was somehow still legible; most of the bleeding of the ink was limited to a few crisscross areas in the middle, where the fold lines were.

“*It’s a shame we haven’t been able to see each other,*” Gô read aloud, spurring Utsumaru to turn around. “*But life interferes with everything we want from it anyway.*”

He held the little note up as Utsumaru stepped in closer, the bottle of soy sauce still in her hands.

“From my ex-patient,” he said, turning it around so that she might see. “He killed himself three years ago. And then three weeks ago he wrote and mailed me this letter.”

“Then maybe he’s not really dead,” Utsumaru said. Just like everything else she’d said, those words came out with the ring of total sincerity about them.



## CHAPTER 3: among Bad Company

“NO, HE’S QUITE DEAD. I saw his dead body; I don’t think anyone made a mistake there.” Gô laid the wooden dipper for his meal across the top of the bowl. “Thank you for lunch, by the way; it was excellent.”

“Glad to’ve served you!” Utsumaru bobbed in place again. “But, still, think about it. You’re sure he wrote that note?”

“The only explanation I have is that he wrote it before he died, and then had someone else mail it for him.” He refolded the note and stuck it back into his wallet; he had developed the paranoid feeling he needed to stop folding and refolding it, or it would simply fall apart at the seams.

“Well, there’s another explanation you’re not considering.”

“What would that be, that he’s not dead? You mentioned that.”

Utsumaru shook her head, making her locks dance back and forth. “You’re ignoring the possibility,” and her smile widened all the more as she said the words, “that *he was dead once but is now alive again.*”

It took a few moments for the breath Gô was holding in his lungs to expel itself—all at once, like a laugh, but with far more scorn than joviality. “I’m sorry. I think it’s more likely this was some kind of prank he wanted to play on me from beyond the grave.” He did not want to simply say *People do not come back from the dead; that’s absurd in the extreme. Please be realistic.* Somehow, even for a conversation this odd, certain basic rules still applied.

Utsumaru slid the shop’s front door back and let the warm summery air come rolling in like the waves of an advancing tide. As luxurious and bath-like as that air was, it spurred even more questions that had no handy answer to attach to them. Why such wonderful weather in March?

“How old are you?” Gô asked.

“Fifteen.” She looked back over her shoulder at him. “Would you rather I be older?”

What on earth was that supposed to mean? he thought.

“You look like you’re in your forties or so,” she added, as if that explained anything. “And I know that older men sometimes like really young girls.”

“No, no.” He moved his hands as if to gesture for her to stop, but instead knocked the lunch bowl to the floor. It sent a splash of cold broth spattering under her feet—which, he could see now, were shod in a pair of high-treaded wooden sandals with red cords. A very *festive* shade of red, he thought, and he found himself still staring at her feet as she bent down to clean up the mess.

She smiled up at him and stood, bowl still in her hands.

“What kind of woman do you want me to be?” she said. “I don’t have to be just fifteen, you know. I can be older, if it’s the sort of thing you like.”

Gô’s gaze moved up slowly from her feet to her eyes and felt his face redden.

“Sometimes,” she said, stepping in closer and putting the bowl back on the counter, “they don’t even want a girl. Sometimes they want something else.” The tone of Utsumaru’s voice changed as she spoke, and so did her face—it grew slightly bonier, less delicate, and there was now a pronounced bulge at the throat.

Gô stumbled backwards off his stool and just barely managed not to get his feet tangled in the chair’s legs.

“Or maybe you’re not interested in *that* sort of thing, then.” Utsumaru sighed and looked disappointed—mostly with himself. *Himself*, Gô repeated, as the Adam’s apple faded and the features became once again softer and more feminine.

Utsumaru met Gô’s gaze once more, still with a mixture of shame and disappointment in her face.

“It’s just something that’s come in handy,” she said. “Sometimes men come around, and want a little company; sometimes they want a girl, sometimes a boy. Sometimes they want an older woman, but I’m not really very good at that. I had an older woman come by once but I couldn’t give her what she was looking for. It was a let-down for both of us, actually. I don’t think even *she* knew what she was looking for.”

As if any of this *explained* anything, Gô thought.

“And you can just do this sort of thing as you please?” He spoke those words for lack of having anything else to fill the silence that had followed.

“Well, within reason.” Utsumaru crossed around him and went behind the counter again, and cranked the knobs of the sink to begin filling it with hot water. “It takes a certain amount of—well, I guess you could say ‘motivation,’ on my part, to do it. If it’s not a situation where I’m not motivated to do anything, it won’t happen. But . . . well, you looked lonely, and I felt sorry for you. Your friend’s missing and you don’t know what happened to him, and I thought I might help. Instead, I just went and scared you, didn’t I?” She squirted a plume of bright green dish soap into the water and plunged the empty bowl into the suds that churned up.

“No—I still shouldn’t have acted like that.”

Gô was of half a mind to tear off the silk cap, crawl out of the yards of silk he was mummified in, pull on his probably still-damp clothes and run back to the train station—but at the same time, there was another human being on the other side of the counter. At least provisionally human, he thought: whatever the explanation for what’s going on, if there’s one to be had, she’s not someone I can just walk out on having wounded, even if unthinkingly.

No, it was all the worse that I did it unthinkingly, no matter how bizarre the circumstances. A heart is a heart is a heart.

Utsumaru was looking at him again, sidelong. “You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to. Although I have the feeling you’re probably going to run into the same problems I did.”

“What do you mean?”

“I came here to get away from my problems, as best I could. And now I can’t walk around without my problems following me. I think you might find you’re in the same fix.”

“Please stop being cryptic.”

“You came here looking for your friend, isn’t that right? If he’s here—and there’s a chance he might be here after all, what with everything I’ve seen—then he can probably explain from his own experiences.”

The good charity of emotion that Gô had felt for her was on the verge of being melted away, until he went back to what she had just said. *There’s a chance he might be here after all, what with everything I’ve seen.* And now everything I’ve seen as well, he thought. And what else had she said? *There’s the other possibility you’re not considering: that he was dead once but is now alive again.* So if a girl can change her sex at will, then why not this? Is that what she’s saying?

“What is this place?” Gô found himself saying. “Why is it full-blast summer here in the north when it wasn’t back in Tokyo?” There were more questions, and he knew they would come tumbling out of him like dice from a cup if he didn’t force himself to stop and let her answer.

“As far as I can remember,” Utsumaru said, and something dreamy entered her voice as she spoke, “it’s always been summer here. At least *here*. I don’t know if it’s the same elsewhere, but . . .” She turned to face him, her hands spattered with suds, and wiped them delicately on her apron. “For some reason I thought you had been here for a while, already. And that maybe you already understood what was going on, but it seems I was wrong. I thought Tokyo was already *overtaken*; I figured it must have been by now.”

“Overtaken?” For some reason it didn’t strike him as the kind of word she would use naturally; it seemed more like a term she had picked up from someone else.

Utsumaru’s cheek twitched; her lips parted, but words wouldn’t come. Maybe this is the first time she’s had to *explain* this to anyone, Gô thought.

He turned back to the open front door and tried to inhale the warm air to calm himself, but it acted more like an astringent than a tonic; it bit into and dried out the inside of his mouth. The river trickling past the shop and the little dirt road leading up to the bridge; the line of cryptomeria just inside the edge of the forest . . . It was beautiful, and it was completely wrong, all of it.

Somewhere in the distance he heard the sputtering roar of motorcycle engines. No, not in the distance; they were rounding the treeline right now, six or seven of them. Their bikes were adorned with gaudy paint and fluttering trinkets, and the man in the lead sported a huge pole-mounted banner splashed with ornately-painted characters.

“I think you have more customers,” Gô said.

“Damn it!” Utsumaru threw the ladle she was washing into the soapy water and reached out to drag Gô back into the shop by his shoulder. “Get back inside, I’m closing up.”

“You know them?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t *have* to know them to know they’re trouble. Look at them.”

“*Hey-hey-hey-hey!*”

Too late. As Gô and Utsumaru had been talking, the gang had pulled up just behind the bridge and dismounted. Their leader bounded up onto the railing of the little bridge and catwalked across it to avoid having to step over the broken planks. The pointed toes of his boots glittered, and the rest of the gang followed close behind him in single file. As they drew closer, and before the door could be slid shut, Gô saw many more things: their scuffed leather jackets; their flared black pants; their long, loud Hawaiian-style silk shirts; and the one or sometimes two short, conical horns that poked up out of their hairlines.

Oh, Gô thought. With all that had happened, this additional little detail, presumably important, was like a headache that accompanied a fatal illness.

The head of the gang—who sported a pomaded and impressively coiffed pompadour from which his horns protruded—put his hand on the doorframe and pushed it all the way back.

“Hey, Ucchan, don’t tell me this dump’s closed!” he said, more or less into Gô’s face.

“Lunch is no longer being served,” Gô replied, backing up a step or two.

“You heard the man!” Utsumaru stuck her head up from underneath Gô’s arm; his sleeve covered the top of her head like the divided curtain that hung over the shop’s doorframe. “Go back home, I’m not reopening until late.”

“Then we’ll hang around! We drove a long way to come here; we heard Ucchan’s oden is the best around! Now, *move*, geezer.” The last was directed at Gô himself, and with that the gang leader smacked his pointed shoe into Gô’s thigh, forcing him to stumble back and to one side. The shoe was metal-tipped and the blow hurt far more than Gô had been expecting it to; he tottered, then righted himself.

Utsumaru’s nose wrinkled as the gang—all six of them—sidled their slow way into the shop and took up every available seat at the counter. Gô, jammed into the corner next to the door, did not move.

The backs of the gang member’s jackets all bore the same insignia:

鬼

*The Demons*, Gô thought. Horns and all. It would have been funny if it hadn't all been happening right in front of him.

"So are you going to cook something or what?" The leader, like all the rest of them, had the drawling diction of a gangster: the rolled Rs, the guttural vowels, the way of phrasing everything as if daring you to contradict them. "We're all pretty hungry, you know!"

"You'll have to wait until sundown. Lunch is no longer being served." Utsumaru stood at the sink with her back turned to the bunch of them, her fingers digging into the lip of the aluminum basin.

"Don't give us that. Get some *oden* in the pot, already!"

Gô stood up as quietly as he could, pressed himself against the wall, and walked casually into the back room where his clothes were ostensibly still drying out. None of the gangsters paid him the slightest attention; they were focused on the job of giving Utsumaru a hard time.

There, in the corner of the back room, was the sword—still in its vertical rack, handle pointing downwards. Gô closed his hand around it and pulled it free, backing out of the room as he did so. I don't have to actually take it out of the sheath, he told himself. If I must use it, I could always just use it as a club. Just having it in my hand somehow seems to help.

As Gô re-entered the front area, the gang leader vaulted over the counter and wrapped a muscled arm around Utsumaru's neck, wrenching her this way and that while he talked. "How hard is it," he growled, "to put the goddamned pot back on the burner and get some lunch!?"

"Screw lunch," one of the others piped up. "Let's just go right to dessert!"

Two others—the one with the Hawaiian shirt, and the other with the leather vest—bolted up off their stools, hooting and laughing. One of them circled his arms around Utsumaru's legs; the other reached up and started to undo her waist tie. She shrieked and almost bent herself double writhing in their arms.

Their laughter stopped when they heard a loud clacking and clattering that resonated through the whole of the eatery. It was the sound of the sword-sheath rattling against the floor. Gô had pulled out the sword and dropped the sheath; he now stood facing them with the weapon held out in front of him and pointing downwards.

"I don't think she wants your business," he said.

“Shut him up!” the gang-leader spat. He jabbed his finger in Gô’s direction, which Gô could now see was adorned with a long, pointed nail, glittering with black lacquer.

The three who weren’t holding Utsumaru down leaped out of their seats and flung themselves at him. One had a knife; another a collapsible billy-club . . . that was all Gô had time to register before he took a step forward and without thinking slashed in an outwards arc at the first man unlucky enough to step in front of him.

The sword caught on something and ripped through it; that much was clear to Gô from the tugging feeling that rode through his arm as he swung. But it did not leave behind a ribbon of blood or split flesh; instead, it seemed to split something far more fundamental than any of that.

The shell that was the gang-rider split open, and someone else fell to the floor in front of him. Gô stared down and saw a skinny-wristed boy of maybe fifteen or sixteen—his thin hair askew, his face wet with tears, and his pants cuffs entirely too high on his shins. Under the stunned eyes of the rest of the gang, the boy stumbled to his feet, backed out of the store, and at the door turned and went on a dead run for the forest.

Gô was still trying to understand what had happened when the two remaining gangsters rushed him. One elbowed his sword-arm out of the way; the other punched him squarely in the side of the head, right at the corner of the eye where it was most likely to make his head spin. Somehow he didn’t lose his grip on the weapon right away, but in the next second they smashed his arm against a wall and the sword’s pommel dropped from his numbed fingers.

I was stupid for ever thinking I could do anything about this, Gô thought.

Over at the counter, the other gang members hauled Utsumaru up onto the cutting board and started yanking her clothes off. The leader tore off one of her stocks and stuffed it into her mouth to silence her squealing.

All of them turned their heads when they heard the roaring of another motorcycle engine outside. No, not one engine; many. Dozens. The smell of their exhaust wafted in the open door, borne on the warm breeze, bracing as a dose of medicine.



## CHAPTER 4: SHINKIGUMI

THE GANGSTERS snapped into action once more.

They dragged Gô and Utsumaru to the open doorway, pressing a butterfly knife against Utsumaru's neck and holding Gô's own sword to the underside of his chin. Gô was not about to gamble with what that sword might do to him based on what he'd seen it to do someone else, and so remained silent and simply traded a frightened look with Utsumaru.

An astounding motley of beings now stood in front of the restaurant. Not "people", Gô told himself, as many of them were clearly not human. Out in front stood an ogreish fellow at least two heads taller than any man he'd ever seen, and proportionately broader. The horns on his head were something like what the bikers had, but he also sported skin the color and texture of a book bound in red leather. His clothing consisted of nothing more than a loincloth that seemed to have been made from animal hide, and balanced across his shoulder was a spiked iron club that was as thick around as both of Gô's legs put together. Another being, a woman who seemed to be about Gô's age, seemed remotely human except for the wild rainbow of peacock feathers that sprouted from her head in lieu of hair. Yet another fellow had the shell and the beak of a turtle, and gripped a long iron-tipped staff in webbed fingers.

It was too much to take in all at once, and the shouting of the gang leader threw off any further attempt on Gô's part to examine them carefully.

"This time we've got hostages, Sabatini!" the biker-gang leader shouted, standing out in front of his prisoners and gesturing widely. "Including your Utsumaru!"

"Actually, she hasn't been 'my' Utsumaru for some time."

The one who responded was one of the few figures in the crowd that seemed remotely human, but Gô had somehow swept past him without noticing him at all. He was perhaps only five feet tall, but dressed with turn-of-the-century-elegance: top hat; swallowtail jacket; swagger stick; ruffled, high-collared English shirt. His

rounded head—and equally rounded, slightly protruding eyes—reminded Gô of a Japanese incarnation of Peter Lorre, capped off with a wild mop of Beethoven hair.

This one—whom Gô presumed was Sabatini—stepped forward and charted a slow, wandering zigzag up to the gang leader, speaking all the while. “No,” he said, “she’s officially been detached from my little company for quite a while. But that doesn’t mean I don’t take an interest in her welfare; after all, what’s an old friend for but to look after other old friends?”

“Stop right where you are!” the gang leader barked back.

Sabatini stopped right where he was; he had wandered in about halfway to the hostages. Everyone behind him bristled slightly but stood their ground.

“This guy’s got a real talent, didja know that?” The gang leader tossed his head back at Gô. “I think he only now just found this out himself! So we’ll make it easy on you and cut a deal. You get Utsu-maru, but this guy’s *our* meat.”

“I’m sorry,” Sabatini said quietly, as if turning down an aperitif, “but I find your terms unacceptable. I’m not in the business of trading lives for lives.”

“*We are.*”

The knife-point pressed all the harder against Utsu-maru’s neck. She made a miserable sound around the sock still stuffed into her mouth, like the mewling of a tormented cat.

“Mr. Sabatini,” Gô forced himself to say, despite the dryness gluing his lips together, “please—if your friend is important to you, do what you must.”

It frightened him how easily he was willing to put himself into someone else’s hands. But the circumstances demanded it, didn’t they? he told himself. This man knows what is happening and I don’t.

“She *is* important to me!” Sabatini swept his hat off and blotted sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, but the action was performed casually enough that Gô was sure the only sweat on him came from the summer heat and not the pressures of the moment. “But from what they’re telling me, you’re as important in your own way.”

“Shut up and make up your mind!” The gang leader ripped Gô’s sword out of his compatriot’s hand and put it point first against Gô’s side. “Five seconds or he’s a dumpling on a skewer.”

Disgust and anger rippled across all the faces in the crowd. The one face that did not change, from what Gô could see, was Sabatini himself. He slid his hat back on his head and chinned himself on his swagger stick.

“You know,” he said idly, “I’m not convinced you’re ready to accept the consequences of these actions.”

The gangleader let out a bellow of rage and tensed his arm.

In that same second, Gô felt himself being yanked violently backwards—no, not him alone, but the two men holding him *and* him along with them were all being pulled. A blow, another blow, and their grip on him slackened; he turned, stumbled, and almost blundered right into someone else.

All he saw of his savior in that moment was a pair of pants legs—leather, with flared cuffs, like the gangster’s own outfits. This was the one who had seized his captors each by an arm, then twisted them around like someone yanking the arm of a slot machine.

Beyond that, Gô saw nothing else, and didn’t try to. He flatted himself against a wall, stood up and turned, and charged back towards the guestroom—where, he could see, the rearmost paper-paneled door in the guestroom had been smashed out of its runners.

He ran out the back of the building, wading through clumps of weeds, only stopping when he realized he’d been running and running under the influence of unthinking panic. His legs itched from having waded through the grass. Once he had drawn several deep breaths and calmed himself, he turned and made his way back along the side of the building. In that moment he heard a great cheer, and could see the happy faces of a few of the assembled company that was surging forward. That encouraged Gô to cross back around to the front of the building and see what had happened.

It was over. Utsumaru huddled against the chest of the giant red-skinned ogre-thing, weeping; he ran his giant hands through her hair and shushed her. The gang leader’s head, scarlet with rage, poked out from under a pile of people busy hog-tying him to a pole. The air was thick with earthy dust raised from the movement of dozens of feet.

One of Utsumaru’s former captors lay face-down on the ground, dead; he was now a businessman in a shabby suit, with gray-ing hair. The other gang member had devolved into a grossly obese young man in a fraying hooded sweatshirt, sprawled against the

counter with an arrow protruding from his eye socket. Sabatini squatted down next to that one, peering at his blood-streaked face.

“Did you aim for the eye?” he called back to another fellow, also dressed much like Gô but with his face powdered a deathly white and his eyebrows shaved. That man, a bow in his hand, shook his head.

“He must have been ready to tip over, then,” Sabatini said, standing up. “Wherever you hit him would probably have killed him.”

“Yeah, but *these* two’re still kicking!” someone else said.

Gô, ill with horror, turned and saw his own captors, each now dangling by the collar of their jackets from the hands of the woman who had saved him. She was almost a full half head taller than Gô himself, although he guessed at least part of that was due to the thick-soled riding boots she wore. Her straight black hair hung down past her shoulders and clung close to the sides of her face. She wore a half-buttoned shirt, another gangster-like affectation, and under the dark purple silk Gô could see a black bra peeking out. Slung loosely across her back was a sword in a cane sheath. Even the sight of her, appealing as she was, could not fully erase the images of the dead men. They lingered like an afterimage from having stared mistakenly into the sun.

“If it was up to me,” and she shoved forward the two men she was holding so they fell face-down, “I’d put down both of these boys right now. They’re not gonna go anywhere except back to base so they can regroup.” She pulled the still-sheathed sword off her back and prodded one of them with its blunt point, then planted her foot squarely on the elbow of another. Evidently she’d twisted that one’s arm particularly hard; when she did that, he yelped and shook.

“Tomoe, please, now!” Sabatini shook his head and tapped her cane-sword with his walking stick to push it politely aside. “Aside from them, how sizeable a party do you think they would be able to bring to bear? Two, three others? This incident is over; let them leave. We don’t have time to watch prisoners.”

“I’m tellin’ you, they’re still dangerous.” Her voice had the same drawling inflection the gangster had, but it sounded even more unrefined and guttural coming out of her mouth than it had theirs. “Maybe they don’t have a lot of buddies left back home, but who’s to say they can’t recruit more?”

Sabatini smiled. “Would you be willing to trust a third-party opinion?”

“If you mean what I think . . .” She worked her mouth around first one way, then the next—then lifted her foot off the man’s arm. “Sure, go ahead. But I’m tellin’ you, Terashima’s not gonna smell anything I haven’t seen yet. *Oi, Terashima! They need you!*” She threw her head back and hollered this last so suddenly that Gô felt his insides jitter.

From the crowd around them another figure came forth—again, someone Gô had seen earlier but not fully registered. He was a bit shorter and stockier than Gô, and was dressed like a medieval warrior-monk—divided and pleated skirt; dark over-jacket decorated with round fur trimmings on the lapels; boxy silk hat strapped to his head, again reminiscent of the one Gô had. Glossy black wings protruded from his back, and his face was covered with a lacquered wooden mask that was crafted after a crow’s head.

He pulled away the mask and revealed a craggy, squinting-eyed face with a broad, loose mouth. The kind of person you’d see tending a bar in some dive, Gô thought, or maybe one of those taxi drivers who can’t stay with any one company for very long because he keeps giving the customers lip. He’s about my age, too, from the look of it.

“Sometimes I think that’s all I am to you people,” Terashima grouched, “a pair of nostrils.”

“Tecchan, easy!” Tomoe’s tone was teasing and sly. “Without your nostrils *Ôyabun* here would be out at sea and drowning. Same for the rest of us. Do yourself a favor and feel grateful, eh?”

The man with the wings didn’t seem amused by being called “Tecchan”; with that face, he didn’t look like the kind of person who suffered any term of affection gladly. He bent low over the two men without replying. Sabatini, on the other hand, smiled at the word *Ôyabun*; to be christened “boss” seemed to have at least some appeal to him.

Terashima pulled the mask back down over his face and tapped its beak to the back of each man’s neck. He inhaled noisily, like a man with a cold, and held his breath.

“Muh . . . hard to tell with these two,” he said after a moment. “Could be harmless; could be volatile. Could go either way.” He straightened up and scratched at the side of his neck under the strap

for the crow mask. "If it was up to me, I'd push 'em off that bridge over there."

"Harsh words, Terashima." Sabatini shook his head and tut-tutted, although he was still smiling. "I think you are taking entirely too many of your signals from Tomoe here. Rather than get rid of them outright, let's simply make sure they're no immediate threat." His eyes were on Gô as he said this, as if to say *This is what I do*. Then: "Utsumaru!"

Utsumaru turned from the ogre's chest and wiped at her face. Rather than hasten to Sabatini's side, she disappeared into the shop and re-emerged a minute later, toting a large wooden cabinet on her back, festooned with dozens of drawers. Gô recognized it as an old-time medicine-seller's box.

She set the box down next to the two prisoners and withdrew a paper charm from a top drawer—the sort of thing sold at street fairs and shrines with incantations for good luck written on the face. From two other topmost drawers she slid out two charms, one in each hand, and applied them to the back of each man's neck.

It was as if the two men had been dipped in a kind of lacquer: they instantly stopped struggling, and their skin (and especially their eyes) took on a glassy, immutable sheen.

"There," she declared, standing up. "At least until sundown tomorrow."

"You *sure* they won't be a problem?" Tomoe's tone was still skeptical.

Sabatini smiled out of one side of his face. "Put it this way: if we see them making trouble again, nobody needs to ask my permission to do away with them. How does that sound?"

Gô swallowed to clear his throat and made a sound like a drowning man's gulp for air. Sabatini must have noticed this; he stepped back into Gô's field of vision and said, "Are you quite all right?"

Gô looked up and nodded, but no words came.

"Here—you left this back in the shop. I think you'll wanna hang onto it." Tomoe stood at his side and offered him "his" sword. He closed his hands around it.

"Oh . . . thank you." Gô nodded again.

Those are the first words I've said in what feel like hours, he thought. And they sound just as strange to my own ears as everything else happening around me is.

“You were very brave back in there,” Utsumaru said, standing up with the box strapped to her back once again.

“I was only brave because I didn’t understand what was going on.” Gô fumbled with the sword a bit; after a minute or two, he finally figured out how to hang it off the sash that was on his outfit. “And, I have to say . . . I still don’t.”

“Sabatini can explain everything. Much better than I can. I’ll be back.” She yanked at the rope securing the box to her back, the better to make it sit more comfortably, and wandered off into the crowd. Behind the first few lines of people (Gô had fallen back on using that word to describe everyone he saw here), he saw a wild assortment of vehicles. Not just motorcycles, but several mopeds, a bicycle that had been converted into a sort of moped with a chain-saw motor for an engine, a cycle-and-sidecar combo, and at least one old panel truck with its side door hanging open like a broken jaw. The activity around him felt like a summer picnic: people pairing up and moving together into groups, chattering and laughter rising up . . .

“I think by now you probably know my name,” Sabatini said, doffing his hat and giving the other man a sharp bow from the waist that made his coattails flip up. “Montiverda Sabatini, commander of the Shinkigumi. At your service. But since you’re certain to know my name by now, perhaps you can tell me yours.”

Gô fumbled out his wallet and presented his card, feeling much like he was about to flunk a job interview. His fingers felt cold and fat.

“A doctor! Would you mind terribly if I called you ‘Gô-sensei’, then? It’s rather funny—there’s really no one in our circle that I can call *sensei* without feeling pretentious. You’re the first. I thought you might get some pleasure out of that!”

Sabatini’s smile and cheer were both genuine, and on sensing this Gô did his best to return the cheer. But his own smile felt wan and tired, not at all what he had hoped for.

“Excuse me a moment,” Gô said, and stepped away from Sabatini—towards the crowd, or more specifically, towards the little stream flowing past the shop.

Fast asleep and dreaming, he thought. That’s what all this is, a dream I’ve fallen into on the train to Echino. Any other explanation simply doesn’t fit. Although it’s a great deal more vivid than my usual dreams, but it hardly makes sense for it to be anything else.

There's a few guaranteed ways to wake up from a dream, he thought. I might as well use the easiest one I know.

He stepped to the edge of the stream and let himself fall in head-first. In the moment before he no longer had his balance, he heard a shout from somewhere behind him. It was smothered when his face smashed into the water.