

**The second story of the Decagram:**

# **Family Matters**

**a**

**Tokyo Babylon/X fanfic**

**by**

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### Disclaimer

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### Credits

Special thanks to Solo [<http://solo.dreamwidth.org>] my beta, who showed great patience and enthusiasm. The presentation of this story in its current state would not have been possible without her!

### Warnings, Spoilers, and Summary

"Family Matters" as a whole is rated NC-17 for violence, crime, occultism, sexual connotations, alternative lifestyles, and a vocal tree having *issues*. Single chapters may be less restricted. As a direct sequel it may not make sense unless you know "36°".

My stories are based solely on the German translation of the CLAMP manga books, therefore there might be differences in names and details from the English or Japanese editions.

The second main story of the Decagram (Sequel to 36°) — Preventing the End of the World caused some side-effects Subaru is ill-prepared to deal with on his own.

### Story Codes and explicit Spoilers

drama, Sei/Su, Fu/Ka, So/Ara, (Tree/Sei)

Character Death, Infanticide, Incest, Minor(13), Lemon Tree (*not* 'Citrus aurantifolia' or 'Tilia!'), Necrophilia, Non-Con, T(h)reesome

Tokyo Babylon Vols. 1, 2, 7, 11; Tokyo Babylon OVA 2;  
X Vols. 8, 10, 15-18, 18.5

Even the most extensive listing of story codes I've come across so far (AFF.net) doesn't list anything regarding "sex with plants", hence the "lemon tree" warning.

**Cross-Over** with "20 Menso ni onegai!!" (Man of Many Faces) and "Gohou Drug" (Legal Drug) by CLAMP as well as "Combination" by Leeza Sei.

Subaru's defense tactic and Seishiro's coffee mug in chapter 11 are courtesy of Solo, who allowed me to play with them after reading a scene from the X-WIP of Doom™.

### about Notation

**Pentacle, pentagram.** I use both words in the strict sense in which the pentacle is a one-line five-pointed star with one tip up and the pentagram is a one-line five-pointed star with two tips up. The pentacle and the pentagram are inversions of each other. Hence, the symbol of the Sumeragi is the pentacle, the symbol of the Sakurazukamori is the pentagram.

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## 00 — Introduction: Winter Rain

*Tokyo nights.*

*It was raining. Countless drops of a steady downpour fell on asphalt, glistening black in the dark on the street below. The wet surface reflected rainbow colors of traffic lights and neon ads, car lamps and shop windows, while the rain created a continuous pattern of sound, monotonous yet always in tune with the glittering, ever-changing lights.*

*Five weeks ago, it had been freezing cold. There had been ice and snow and fog, encompassing a city that should have ceased to exist.*

*Five weeks ago, the fate of the world should have been decided, and the decision had been thwarted — by Death.*

*Death, who had granted life.*

*Death, who now carried Life's marks on his hands.*

Subaru leaned against the partly open sliding door to the balcony of his Shinjuku apartment. Raindrops stuck to the pane, breaking the city lights into fragments. The thin thread of smoke from the cigarette in his hand curled and twisted to dissipate in the faint draft. The hand-wide gap let in the freshness and the sound of the falling winter rain together with the multitude of sounds of the restless city beneath it. He had come to find solace in its ever-changing, never-ending song, the constant reminder of its continued existence.

The phone on the floor behind him rang, a discordant note in the endless pattern of city and rain. He made no move to answer it. After the third ring the answering machine took the call, playing the plain, uninformative message he'd recorded on returning from CLAMP campus.

His grandmother had called a couple of times. He had preferred not to be there, not to answer the inquiries that she left on the tape about the End of the World, the battle and finally even his well-being. Too much had happened, too many questions needed to be answered before he would have any answers for others. And too much of him had changed; changes his grandmother wouldn't — and the previous Head of the Sumeragi couldn't — approve.

=Subaru-san, if you are there, if you receive this call, please do call back, do contact us...=

His grandmother's voice came hollow from the weak speakers of the AM. Subaru pulled a long, last drag from his dying cigarette and flipped its butt out into the night.

~::~::~~

Rain thrummed loudly on Seishiro's black umbrella, competing with the music that wafted out of the brightly lit entrance into which his target had just disappeared. He knew the club, but not well enough...

=Yes?= His call was finally answered by a rather sleepy operator. =Who is—=

"I need the key data on the Farfalle down in Roppongi. Now," he snapped into the phone, impatient as another car rushed past, splattering most of the narrow sidewalk with dirty water. He was glad for the leather coat tonight; without it he'd have been thoroughly soaked by now despite the umbrella.

The operator seemed to have woken up enough to realize the source of the order. The beeping of a PC, followed by rapid keystrokes came from the squeaky receiver of the small cellphone. A prepaid one, no tracking. Even with the trouble of disposal, the cells were a lot more convenient than having to search for a public booth. This one — as well as the temporarily assigned number — wouldn't last to the end of the night.

=I have the information, sir. Club Farfalle, Roppongi, owned by Miyage Tetsuo. One of the most frequented clubs in Tokyo these days and certainly one of the largest. Multiple interconnected floors around a central dome holding the dance floor. Entrance on the first level. Clientele depending on event. Tonight that would be salarymen and their companions, average age about thirty. Expect heavy security and high entrance fees. Shall I try to sneak in a pre-booked invitation?=  
"Not necessary." Seishiro disconnected the cell and removed the battery.

Slipping the cloakroom ticket into his pocket, Seishiro worked his way through the crush. The din of voices and music on three levels was deafening. He crossed over to the bar and exchanged the two drink tickets included in the exorbitant cover charge for a single glass of acceptable liquor served on a small tray with proper aplomb. He leaned his back against the bar and, nursing his drink, inconspicuously scanned the establishment for his target.

'Heavy surveillance' meant there would be cameras — visible and invisible — with human operators in front of a battery of monitors. He didn't know where in the building the operators sat and at what distance, so he couldn't influence them directly. And there was also the risk of camera records being kept for a day or two. It would have to be death from natural causes.

A set of circular stairs went up to the VIP lounges hanging like nests on the second level; another set circled down to the overflowing dance floor. Stroboscopic lights scattered over the dancers, sometimes highlighting a dress in the frantic rhythm of the electronic beat that gave the pulse to the crowd. The target was down there. Seishiro was sure of that. He emptied the glass in a single swig and left it on the tray.

The basses were strong enough to be felt rather than heard. Seishiro's pulse and breathing became faster, involuntarily chasing after the rhythm. Annoyed, he countered the effect on his way down. The dance floor was crowded to the point where the press of the swaying bodies developed its own tide, not always in synch with the music. The Farfalle wasn't his type of club. He preferred more exclusive ones; more exclusive regarding the number of guests per square meter at least.

Multicolored lights glittered on and around him. Occasionally, the red spotlight made the crimson dress of his random dance partner translucent. Her dilated pupils told him of Ecstasy or something stronger. She danced sensually close with her hands on his shoulders, playing with her dress riding up on the cloth of his pants. A whiff of heavy, extravagant perfume hung about her—

—like the shadow hung about the dancer behind her. Seishiro focused with sharp, cold determination. The hiding spell he whispered under the beat of the music was simple; hiding something in plain sight had once been a childhood's game. It made people's attention skirt away from the bespelled object — or person — and anything that might connect them with it. He preferred not to have a panic in this crush while he was part of it.

His real strike was swift, clean, though the target's spasms were anything but. Although the systemic effect on the target was severe, the actual manipulation was minuscule, merely closing the man's carotids, thus the ensuing sakanagi was accordingly weak. Seishiro reflected it effortlessly. Humans were weak creatures; mammals in general were.

Embolic stroke followed by multiple organic dysfunction, the coroner's report would read. A rather inelegant way to die. However, Seishiro admired the elegance of the solution, involving no variables but himself and the target.

The spell induced the stroke; the sakanagi caused the death.

His dance partner's high heels pierced an already dead hand. He balanced her and strengthened the hiding spell, noticing that the dark blood matched the color of her dress. She would have to answer to the police for the bloodied shoes later tonight, and was likely going to get a drug screening in return. He took a turn towards the stairs. The hiding spell wouldn't work much longer.

He felt the tingle of invisible petals caressing him as he wound his way through the crowd while transferring the spiritual essence. He disentangled himself from his dance partner and sauntered up the stairs to the lounge area. He claimed his umbrella and coat and nodded at the bouncers as he left. Screams started inside when he was halfway down the long entrance stairs.

Outside, the rain had ceased.

~::~::~~

In Shinjuku, Subaru woke with the taste of alcohol on his tongue. He'd left the window ajar when he finally went to bed. The room was filled with the chill of a rainy night and the dulled sounds of the city outside, yet he was sweating. Colorful stroboscopic lights flashed through his vision.

He sat wearily up in bed and buried his head in his hands, pressing the palms against his eyes. Ghostly frames wavered, dancing, around him. His heart thundered in his ears, throbbing with the heavy beat of music played... elsewhere.

*Seishiro...* he groaned, struggling out of bed. *Not again...* He all but felt his way to the light switch through a press of milling people. White light flooded the room. Metal stairs vibrated under his feet— No, that wasn't him, that was—

He pressed his hands against his aching temples. *Seishiro.* He had to sort Seishiro's impressions from his own and force them back or—

Laughter arose out of the pulsing music. An apparition in red walked into his arms, pulling him into the dance. He resisted the ephemeral touch, closed his eyes, focused on his fingertips.

°°°Om namah S—°°°

Hands locked over his shoulders, played flirtatiously with his neck hair. A body slid against him in the sway of the dance. Perfume hung in the air, an oppressive, sultry scent...

Subaru's eyes flew wide. The dancers dimmed to shadows; the music lost its power in cold, perfect focus. A man was dancing on his bed, smiling, lost in the moment and the dance as he moved to a tune Subaru was no longer hearing.

Thrill. Anticipation. The marks on Subaru's hands flashed briefly.

"No! Don't—" Involuntarily he reached for the victim; gripped empty air as his shin slammed into the edge of his bed.

Spasms not part of any dance rocked the man. A thread of saliva dripped down his chin onto the bedcover. His eyes showed naked panic until they rolled back and he collapsed on the bed. Shadows were around the victim, dancing on the sheets, laughing, oblivious.

Subaru felt sick, felt the impending sakanagi reaching for him— for Seishiro—

Another flare of the scars. Reflection.

The uncontrollable spasms stilled when the sakanagi ripped through the victim. Dancers stepped over the body, around it, on it. Blood welled from a still hand pinned onto his pillow by high heels. Drunken laughter. Sakura petals fluttering through his vision, catching the spiritual essence evaporating from the body. Satisfaction. Sakura petals caressing him...

A cherry twig had caressed Seishiro in the twilight of the Kokyo East Gardens...

Seishiro. He. He had to—

°°°Om namah Sivaya.°°°<sup>1</sup>

The voices dimmed. Finally. With a sob of relief he all but fell to his knees in front of his now empty bed. He was so tired. Each time it took longer to separate himself from Seishiro. Each time it got more difficult. Each time he got less warning...

"...continue," Seishiro had said.

Subaru choked. He couldn't continue like this. If something like this happened in public... during a job... Exhausted, he rested his head on the bed. He didn't want to go to Seishiro. He didn't want to— He wanted too much to—

Music played at the edge of his perception. Lights flickered behind him. He smelled leather, felt a long coat enveloping him.

Screams... and cool night air...

It wasn't until the sun was shining brightly through the open curtains that he finally pulled himself up into his bed for some desperately needed sleep. Sleep that was still disturbed, nonetheless. This time by more mundane tasks like reading a morning paper while taking sips from a cup of sweet black coffee, or burning his fingertips on a slice of hot toast.

Drowsily he rolled onto his side, licking his burned fingers...

Freeing a large cat stuck under the garden gate had to be a real dream — surely Seishiro wouldn't bother...

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1 "Om namah Sivaya". Vedic mantra. Invocation of the most holy name of Shiva to quell the instinct, cut through the steel bands and turn the intellect within and on itself, to face itself and see its ignorance to save the soul. It invokes Shiva's grace, the world, the soul, and the five elements. [source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aum\\_namah\\_Sivaya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aum_namah_Sivaya)]

## 01 — Summer Heat

*...when the first Divine Man Izanagi returned from the realm of Death covered in dirt and decay, he went to cleanse himself in the holy stream. Amaterasu sprung from the water with which he cleaned his left eye, and Tsukiyomi was born from the waters from his right eye.*

*Amaterasu became the Goddess of the Sun and Tsukiyomi the God of the Moon and they ruled the realm of Man together. But one day Tsukiyomi attended a feast in Amaterasu's stead and when he found the Food Goddess Uke Mochi preparing his meal by vomiting rice and fish and defecating the game, he slew her in disgust.*

*Amaterasu refused to see him after that and took to the heavens; and Tsukiyomi followed, for with Amaterasu in the heavens he could not stay on Earth. But the realm of Man still had to be pacified and so Amaterasu sent her grandson to do her deeds among the living.*

Thus far, the legend tells the truth. However, not even the Sumeragi are aware...

*...that with Amaterasu's offspring walking the Earth the balance of Yin and Yang demanded that Tsukiyomi too bear a substitute into the world of Man. And the next day a sakura sprouted from the dark soil. The Sakura.*

*Thus Amaterasu's children watched the day and the Sakura guarded the night.*

*For a thousand years the Sakura remained unchanged, watching Amaterasu's children chase the ghosts of the dead while it hunted the living who vexed the realm of Death. But the spiritual power of Amaterasu spread from the Imperial house and prospered in the populace. And with the Sun Goddess's light spreading, the shadows spread, too, becoming darker, more dangerous, and more difficult for the Sakura to contain.*

*Then a man came from a land called Chen in the South, fleeing from civil war and a price on his head for he was too close to the throne of a dying dynasty; and with him two things came to the land:*

*Onmyodo and Benzaiten. The first he practiced, the latter he worshiped.*

*And on the brink of spiritual war, with a dead emperor lying on its roots, the Sakura struck a deal...*

...because of which a young onmyoji startled out of death stupor with the name of his dying sister on his lips on a hot August day fourteen-hundred years later.

Tokyo Station

Tokaido Shinkansen - Hikari [Tokyo - Kyoto - Shin-Osaka]

August 14, 1991 — Midday

Tokyo Station was crowded and loud. Loudspeakers blared information about train schedules and tracks through the din of countless voices. The people milling about on the Shinkansen platform were a blurred mass to Subaru's eyes.

Railway assistants in their blue uniforms and white gloves had cordoned off a small section of the platform, saving them from the crush of people, and were busily helping his grandmother with her wheelchair into the center car with its green class compartments.

Distant relatives whose names and faces Subaru didn't know framed them; silent, dark-clad entities who had been trailing them since they'd left the apartment in Shinjuku this morning.

As long as Subaru could remember, his grandmother had never traveled with a personal guard. As long as he could remember, he'd never had bodyguards, either. There'd also never been a green class compartment reserved for them; a seat reserved in standard class had always sufficed.

A lot of things had changed since... *then*. Subaru felt a muscle in his cheek twitch at the evasion. He ought to face it directly. He had to if he wanted to fulfill his promise. If he—

The sigil scars on his hands tickled when he was about to follow his grandmother into the car. He whirled around at the faint blue glow — and found his way blocked by two of the guards, taking a firm hold on his arms and shoulders. Subaru froze in their grip. They weren't just protecting him; they were *guarding* him.

"Subaru-san," his grandmother's quiet voice came from the railway car behind him. "Please be sensible and don't cause a commotion. O-Bon ends tomorrow. We have to bury your sister."

"I would prefer you to cover your hands again, Subaru-san," grandmother said sternly after the railway attendant had closed the compartment door behind them, the shadow of one of the guards remaining visible

through the frosted glass panes. "The marks will raise unfavorable questions about you. Our escorts know to keep silent but other people may not feel so inclined."

Subaru didn't answer. Tracing the no longer glowing scars on his right hand with slightly unsteady fingertips, he stared out the window next to his seat. The train wasn't moving yet.

"Subaru-san, you may not realize it, but you are in a grave situation that cannot wait. Since this is probably the only time we can speak without untoward listeners before attending the funeral, I ask you, what happened between you and that man?"

The train was moving...

"Is he the one who was with you on Tokyo Tower last year?"

...gaining speed rapidly...

"Did it go on for that long?"

...it would reach traveling speed when passing Ginza. The bone in his right arm had long healed but the regeneration of muscles and sinews had been stalled by his catatonic state; the same went for the broken ribs, though the absolute rest had actually helped with the pierced lung. He recalled the lecture the chief physician had given him that morning about the appropriate exercise and care he had to take to achieve a complete recovery.

Complete recovery.

The words didn't make sense.

"Subaru-san, I am talking to you."

He finally turned his head to look at his grandmother. For the blink of an eye, the shadow of a bridge shrouded her face in darkness. She studied him sternly; her hands clasped tightly in her lap. He remembered those hands around him, touching, anchoring, holding him in the moment his sister's death had ripped through his soul. One of the few times she'd held him. She'd felt warm—

"It displeases me to speak of such indelicate, private matters — and I don't intend to mention any of this again — but we have to determine how far your dignity has been breached."

Subaru blinked. "We?" he asked tonelessly.

"The elders. You are the head of the clan. Your unblemished dignity is our concern." Another bridge shadow crossed her face. "Your medical records state that you have not been violated. But tell me truthfully—" She searched his eyes, held them firmly. "How far did you venture down the path of Shudo?"<sup>2</sup>

Subaru looked at her, uncomprehending.

"Did you perhaps engage... willingly?"

The racing train was suddenly dead still.

Subaru had never felt so cold, so alone. Hokuto's death was an open wound in his soul, her laughter, her embraces, her support...

...of him... of... *him*.

Her murderer.

He felt sick. His grandmother was still studying him. A frown had begun to crease her forehead. Turning back to the window, he finally managed to bite off an answer against the bile on his tongue. "No."

He saw his grandmother's reflection in the window pane nod in relief, saw his own eyes reflected there. Dull eyes, more grey than green now.

He wondered what Seishiro had seen in his face that day and what he would see now.

His ungloved hands balled into fists at the thought. No!

He wished the Shinkansen would rattle in its tracks like the old trains on the slower lines. The rattling would remind him that the world was still moving.

"Subaru-san." His grandmother's hand came to rest on his. The touch no longer held any warmth for him. "You mustn't succumb to hatred. Hatred is his way, not ours."

"You're wrong." His words were faint, flat, spoken toward the window. *The Sakurazukamori doesn't care enough to hate.*

If only he could say the same of himself.

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2 Shudo (abbrev. of Wakashudo, "the way of the youth") is the Japanese tradition of age-structured homosexuality prevalent in samurai society from the medieval period until the end of the 19th century. [sources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shudo> - <http://members.aol.com/matrixwerx/glbthistory/samarai.htm>]

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
August 14, 1991 – Evening

It was hot and humid; a sweltering, choking heat encompassing them when they arrived. Servants scurried between the limousine and the house, preparing the ramp at the engawa for his grandmother's wheelchair, carrying luggage, brushing sand off the stones in front of them... all in the shadow of the silent guards.

He had visited countless times while he stayed in Tokyo. Had taken the Shinkansen in the morning, had cleansed himself and paid respect to his family's kami and their honored deceased, before holding the tea ceremony with his grandmother. Then they'd discussed the matters for which he'd been called, and he'd taken the last Shinkansen back to Tokyo to go to school half-asleep the next morning.

This time he hadn't been called. This time he wouldn't have to run for the last train, and he wouldn't attend school tomorrow. He wouldn't ever again.

White-clad servants swarmed around his grandmother, cleaning the wheels of the chair she now needed. She had always appeared so strong, so unmovable to him and now— He clenched his hand silently as he followed her into the depths of the ancient house. The tatami crunched faintly under the wheels, now that the impurity of travel had been banished with salt from what she could no longer leave outside because she had defended him against his own foolishness.

A faint breeze wafted around his head, spread cool over his sweat-dampened clothes. The dark openwork carvings of the centuries-old transoms were uncovered, allowing the air to move freely throughout the house.

As clan head he was entitled to a room of his own; but one of the fusuma separating it from the inner hall had been removed, and the wall he shared with grandmother's suite of rooms wasn't solid either. It meant temperatures remained bearable inside. It also meant that there would be no word, no gesture of his that wasn't heard, observed, judged.

For the first time Subaru wasn't sure it would be judged favorably.

When Hokuto had occupied the small chamber next to his rooms for herself, all the fusuma had been closed and the transom had been boarded even in summer in spite of the heat. Rock and pop music had thundered from her room, rattling fusuma and shoji in their tracks; and her laughter had threatened to shake the ofuda from the walls. Rock and pop and laughter...

Now it was silent and the fusuma had been removed.

One of the guards brought his luggage. A maid hurried to unpack his belongings into the closet. Both refused to look at him. The shoji to the garden was also open. Another black shadow stood to the side of it, deceptively at ease watching the pond smoldering in the heat of the reddish late afternoon sun. The first fireflies were dancing above the murky waters. Cicadas chirped in the distance. The air smelled of ash and incense, the scent of O-Bon, the festival of the deceased. His sister was now among them. O-Bon would end tomorrow. He would make sure that she knew to go to the other world then.

A plain dark yukata was laid out for him, not yet the black silk mofuku for the mourning rituals. The yukata would have to bear his soiled touch until he had found the strength to purify himself. The mofuku must not be spoiled. The yukata...

He ignored it and stepped in front of the kamidana, the white wooden shelf holding representative tablets of his family's gods that had been an integral part of his southward rooms since he could recall. He knelt as he was: in jeans with his sweat-soaked shirt sticking to his back. It was the plainest shirt Hokuto had ever chosen for him and he knew the shirt would just 'disappear' when he took it off — and all that would remain was the yukata now, the mofuku later, and—

He shut his eyes against the pain. He'd barely cleansed his hands and face and approached the highest gods, causing a stir of disapproving whispers from servants and relatives alike. He bowed his head and prayed in silence, begging for the gods to watch over his sister until she found her way to the other world, begging them to forgive him for addressing them in this state of impurity.

August 14, 1991 — nearing midnight

He'd personally wrapped up the kamidana in white rice paper after extinguishing the reverence lamps. The spirit chamber was opened by now; countless lights were lit in front of his ancestors' grave tablets, flickering in unfelt breezes. Rice was offered, and sake.

Two of his more distant relatives observed the preparations for the funeral, purifying the rooms with salt and covering the well-wishing ofuda on the doors with white paper; others were holding the wake in front of an empty casket in his stead, while he was to undergo purification. Hokuto was his sister, his second half; he should have been the chief mourner in accordance with his torn heart; but he was also the head of the clan, their strongest spiritual guide.



He wasn't allowed to ease his pain. He was to direct the ceremony. Hokuto's brother wouldn't be at her funeral; the head of her clan would be.

Fire bowls cast an uneasy light in a night filled with the sounds of falling water, crackling fire, and cicadas. A small stream fell over the rock above his head to lose itself in the shallow waters of the pond it had carved in centuries of continuous flow. Countless generations of Sumeragi had used the place for their ritual purification. Subaru sat motionless on flat stones, shivering in spite of the heat lasting deep into the night. Colorful paper lanterns were sailing across the sky above him, guiding the deceased during O-Bon; the white ones representing those who had died in the last year. Many burned out soon, but some hovered for hours before the candle heating the air inside them flickered and died, or lit the rice paper and tumbled the lantern into a fiery death.

It was said that lanterns falling in flames belonged to those who had been murdered.

If the saying was true then his sister's lantern would fall.

*I, and only I, will kill him.*

The water flowed over him. He had to let the thoughts flow with it...

*I will kill him.*

Seishiro. He could dismiss everything and everyone from his thoughts but Seishiro.

He could consider everyone equally special to him but Seishiro.

Him he wanted to kill. Him he wanted to k—

Subaru shivered. The lies and the truths were carved into his soul like nothing else would ever be. Seishiro's, and his own.

His grandmother was right. He was...

...touched...

...soiled...

...changed.

The flowing water tugged at his arms as he closed his fists. *I, and only I, will kill him. I will kill him.* ran like a mantra through his meditation, a mantra ringing hollow in his soul, calling a god not meant to be his. *I will kill him.*

He bowed to his family's gods, begging forgiveness.

August 15, 1991

The shoji between the spirit chamber and the great hall had been removed. The plain casket made of white hinoki wood was displayed in front of the tiers holding the grave tablets of the ancestors. The Sumeragi were an old clan; often challenged, never overcome. There were so many tablets by now, standing in rows upon rows with the oldest ones occupying the top shelf, the kanji of their names all but bleached from wood darkened by age; those in whom the gift had been developed most strongly held the center of the tiers and the weak got the side boards.<sup>3</sup>

Much as in life, Subaru thought. Behind him, his relatives took their places in order of rank and power on embroidered cushions aligned in the great hall, paying reverence to one of their own now dead.

Hokuto's tablets would come to the lowest shelf, toward its left corner. The place was already cleaned and marked. The center of that shelf was left empty, but directly to its right stood two tablets side by side: plain white wood with golden kanji spelling his grandfather's name and a similar one with the two topmost kanji in red: his grandmother's, who'd pledged faithfulness at her husband's grave and marked it for everyone to see and therefore was no longer to be addressed by her given name.

A month ago, she'd almost had the two red kanji colored in gold.

Almost. She had survived. He had... hadn't he?

Ceremonial lamps flickered in front of the plates. Incense urns left and right of him filled the spirit chamber with smoke and the scent of burning cedars. The ding of a small bell told him that everyone had taken his place.

He bowed his head, clapped his hands three times, and began with the invocation. The white ceremonial robe glowed in the light of the countless lamps on the tiers, obscuring the black mofuku he wore underneath.

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3 Onmyojuitsu includes components of Shinto, Buddhism, Taoism, various Chinese concepts, and a good touch of the Indian Vedas. Therefore I abstain from using strict Shinto or Buddhist rites for the Sumeragi household observances (also because I don't know enough of either religion to do it justice in writing) but use a mixture of the above, with daily observances being more Shinto and funeral customs being tinged with Buddhism. If I accidentally commit any absolute no-no, please let me know. I don't intend any offense.

For old Shintoist and Buddhist home shrine and funeral rites I suggest chapter 2 of "Glimpses at Unfamiliar Japan" by Lafcadio Hearn [<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/h>]

Black adorned with pentacles underneath white... and uncovered hands scarred with pentagrams. He had not covered his hands as his grandmother wished.

The ancestors' grave tablets seemed to waver in the smoke and the unsteady light of the flames. Today their number would grow by one. Today he was leading another one of their descendants to their ranks and rows.

His sister. His second half.

He prayed she'd be welcomed.

The grave tablets watched in silence.

He prayed the ancestors would help his sister to find her way easily.

The band of prayer beads clicked faintly as he finished the turn, bowed his respect and began the final sutra.

The casket in front of him was closed. And empty, except for the offerings. Hokuto's body had never been found.

Smoke from the final O-Bon fires on the hills surrounding Kyoto mingled with the incense, making it hard to breathe. He was standing in front of the endless rows of his ancestors, awaiting their judgment for himself so that they might not judge his sister. Having failed at purification, he was soiled. The white shikifuku over the black mofuku was an apt symbol for his standing among the clan.

Pure on the outside; soiled within. He, who was unable to banish her murderer from his thoughts, put all his faith, all his spiritual strength into his incantation. It was his fault, not his sister's. His alone. His sister was pure at heart and deserved her place among the ancestors holding guard over the Sumeragi. She did. He himself... would be another matter.

He closed his eyes, called for her in his mind. Having died during O-Bon when the dead visited the living, her spirit had to be confused and displaced. He called her to give his farewell, his love, the forgiveness that she had begged of his catatonic form and needn't have asked, and to lead her on towards where she had to go and he couldn't follow. Not yet.

°°°Hokuto-chan.°°°

He concentrated even more, felt a faint tugging, a pull as if there was a hint of a ghost's presence just beyond his reach. He followed it, poured himself, his essence, his own spirit into it, ignoring the ceremony's demands...

This wasn't Within. This had no clear limits, no boundaries and shapes. This was... a veil obscuring the line where the realms of Life and of Death touched.

The taiji, symbol of his art, of the duality of Yin and Yang, was said to be white and black; yet there was one spot that was neither: the line where black became white — and white became black — in the spirit space the veil was the line, seemingly clear and yet all undefined, neither black nor white. Grey.

°°°Hokuto-chan!°°° he was crying, reaching further, deeper into the mists. °°°Ho—°°°

The sigils on his hands flared, searing, burning his flesh. Gnarled black roots shot up in a tangled web, blocking his path. One lashed out, whipped him across the chest, tearing the shikifuku. Prayer beads bounced about, disappearing in the mist.

Blood soaked the white cloth that now hung in rags, its tatters glowing in the eternal twilight. The roots flailed again, pushing, shoving him back—

Hands were around him, holding him, anchoring him; countless voices whispered devotions, prayers. Grandmother...

He collapsed in the spirit chamber, under the disapproving stares of the grave tablets of countless Sumeragi long gone, his shikifuku torn and bloodstained, gaping open to reveal an immaculate black mofuku underneath.

His clan's prayers were holding him back, shielding him from the black roots reaching for him. The scars on his hands glowed blue, their light shimmering on the mofuku. Black silk unstained by blood...

Death wasn't bloodied. Life was. "Hokuto-chan..." he all but sobbed, exhausted, plaintive, hating himself for it. "Hokuto-chan. *Where* are you?"

He came to himself in his darkened room with his grandmother sitting beside the futon on the floor. Somebody had pushed her wheelchair aside and closed the shoji. All the shoji. For once there was privacy. Protective ofuda of his grandmother and some of his spiritually strongest relatives were lining the walls above and below his own ricepaper-covered ofuda. He blinked in the twilight, feeling parched dry, and tried to sit up. His arms trembled at the attempt.

"Easy, Subaru-san." His grandmother dabbed his temples with a cloth smelling of mint oil and something more sacred. "You've been burning up with fever." The old woman closed her eyes briefly. "You almost ventured too far. Why, Subaru-san?" The hand holding the cloth to his temple trembled slightly. "You of all people know better than that."

He swallowed against his dry mouth and the lump in his throat. He didn't trust his voice when he finally forced the words out. "Hokuto..." He balled his hands into the sweat-dampened cloth of the futon. "Obaachan. Hokuto wasn't there."

His grandmother's hand stilled.

## 02 — Spring Breeze

*...The Sakurazukamori is meant to be my eyes and ears, my way to understand the world of the living. I, the Moon's descendant, am dependent on him to make sense of the rapidly changing world fast-living Men have created. In return I am his protector and the head of his house, the keeper of a knowledge otherwise lost to a clan that cannot always succeed by blood...*

*...In most generations there's nothing more than that: sustenance and service, on both sides. But then there are those whose blood makes me giddy, who look at the world and see something new. They are the best and they always bring change...*

*...Chen Yue was such a man...*

*...and Sakurazuka Seishiro is another...*

*...and the Sumeragi enticed both...*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
February 2, 2000 — 09:46

The morning sun shone brightly. In its orange tinged light the ornamental steel rods of the garden gate cast an intricate shadow pattern onto the stone path.

Seishiro raised the coffee mug to his mouth, breathing in the slightly bitter tang of the black liquid, while scanning the headlines of the morning paper for any accounts of yesterday's business. There were none. A stroke wasn't that uncommon a death for a high-class financial manager, especially in clubs like those his target had frequented.

Seishiro folded the paper and, distracted, rubbed at the tingling scars on his hands. The Sakura disliked natural deaths, so he had better go and see to it later today. He folded the paper and put it on the chair next to him before he retrieved his toast, hissed and dropped the hot slices onto his dish.

Later, after covering the somewhat cooled toast in butter and honey, he leaned back and looked out his kitchen window into the sun-streaked garden. Yoshino's oversized cat attempted to squeeze itself through the gate, leaving more than a little hair in the ornamentation.

*Never underestimate the ability of a cat to flatten itself,* he thought, watching amused, chewing.

He put the half-eaten toast down when the screaming began.

*Never overestimate it.* He sighed, reaching for his keys. *Yoshi, you are a menace.*

Late morning was nearing midday by the time he had delivered a ruffled, dementedly purring Yoshi to his sole neighbor Yoshino-san — talk about imaginative pet names! — and successfully extricated himself from her gratitude for his rescue of her beloved—

At that time he had tuned her out, thinking sourly, and not for the first time, that it hadn't been his brightest idea to use the van still marked *Sakurazuka Animal Hospital* to transport his personal belongings when he moved house. Just when he'd closed his clinic for good, it had gotten him a seriously oversized cat for a "private patient", trying his patience by being constantly underfoot. If Yoshino-san weren't that useful a neighbor... He sighed and searched his coat pockets for cigarettes, realizing with mild dismay that he would have to buy new ones later on.

When he sauntered toward the Kototoi-dori and Ueno Park, a motorbike was parked in front of the small local police station, making him wonder whether or not the station's immediate vicinity was already monitored. The surveillance system across Tokyo was growing rapidly, particularly since the suspected 'terrorist act' against the Ebisu Garden Place last summer. Yet another inconvenience caused by 'Kamui'.

That was why natural cause was about to become the standard *modus operandi*. The Tree might be upset about that, but he didn't think there was a choice: moving unseen was rapidly becoming impossible. Cameras, both visible and invisible, watched — and most often recorded — a lot of places by now, even in the seedier parts of town; recordings that were studied in case of incidents or watched live by human operators. Face recognition software and emergency evaluation programs were in the making, but not yet deployed: too many false positives. He'd had some rather interesting talks with Nokoru about the topic, at least when they hadn't been discussing the end of the world. Human operators, despite their cost, still had the better score, but the software was catching up. Humans he could handle, but electronics had no mind for illusions to work on. And he wasn't quite reckless enough to burn spells on CDs.

The Sadako<sup>4</sup> incident had been a strict warning regarding analog storage. The curse plague had finally died when the quality of the copies was reduced to a point no longer fit for transmitting magic; by then the death toll had exceeded two thousand. Seishiro didn't want to think about it going digital, where every copy had the same quality as the original, was in fact a new master disk.

It meant that a lot of his old tactics had to be reassessed, changed or adapted. And therefore, surveillance was one of the issues he had to discuss with the Sakura. Surveillance, fat cats, and the intensifying burn of the marks marring the backs of his hands. They'd begun to disturb his sleep and his work, taking ever more concentration and stronger spells to keep the blood-red glow concealed from ordinary people — and most importantly, from the Mori.

Leaving the university district, he crossed onto the nearly deserted sand paths of Ueno Park itself.

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
February 2, 2000 — 13:52

It had become conspicuously warm for a day in early February. For the first time in this year the sun had true power. It was pleasant to sit here on a thick gnarled root, feeling the warmth on his face while his back rested comfortably against the Sakura's trunk.

Ueno Park was coming to life in the sun's warmth. He all but saw the buds on normal trees and bushes burst into minuscule leaves, laying a haze of green across the bare plant skeletons. The people of Tokyo had not yet noticed the arrival of spring, and the park was left to its winter residents: pigeons, rabbits, the old fox in his hole near the Metropolitan — and him.

He watched two rabbits lying in the sun flat like mats put out to dry, nibbling the first fresh blades in the winter grass, and wondered if his shikigami would enjoy a kill of its own for a change.

A tuft of flowers brushed against his temple, ran sensuously slow along his jaw and down his throat. He warned the Tree off when it was about to dip into his collar.

The Sakura had become rather... snuggly since he was carrying marks; snuggly, cautious, and tender. The latter actually worried him. The Tree had seldom hesitated to draw blood; now it took pains that it didn't. Pink blossoms fluttered over the faintly glowing scars on his hands, easing the burn. Idly, he wondered if they would turn white when 'natural causes' became the normal mode of operation or whether the color was the result of spiritual as much as of physically absorbed blood. And was the Tree able to forgo real blood or would he still have to provide some?

He watched the rabbits from before chasing each other into the shrubs.

Would he have to resort to blood conserves or would animal blood suffice?

The trunk at his back quivered with sudden mirth. A blossom-cushioned twig raised his chin, tipping his head back like the Tree had used to do when he was still a boy. When had it stopped doing that?

*...I'm not a vampire, Sei-chan... The twig stroked the pulse under his ear. ...I'm just resisting changes in my favorite diet. You wouldn't forgo the cherries on your sundaes, either...*

"If obtaining them became dangerous, would you provide them?"

He sneezed when a twig tapped his nose.

*...I'm not some fructiferous procreator!...*

"Just some flowering procrastinator."

*...Look who's talking... the Sakura retorted in a flutter of petals.*

"What's wrong?" Seishiro looked up into the crown when the blossomed twigs soothing his hands suddenly fell away from him. *...Sei-chan...* The Tree whispered, strangely insistent, with a last brush of flowers over his hands. *...Go home...*

Seishiro walked at a brisk pace. Faint music, drifting from an open window, mixed with the even rhythm of his leather soles on the sidewalk. Birds were singing behind him in Ueno Park and ahead of him on the Yanaka. He wondered why the Sakura had asked him to go home. It wasn't as if anything untoward had happened to his house. He'd know if his wards were breached, and the vicinity itself held some rather imaginative protections. A few of the Mori were able to avoid some of them, but most were definitely out of their league. Other intruders would have even more problems...

Except the Kamui.

But the Sakura wouldn't send him towards them unwarned.

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4 Sadako. Yamamura Sadako, a vengeful spirit in the novel "the ring" by Suzuki Koji, originally published 1991, who cursed people to death with a video tape. The curse could only be broken by copying the tape and having somebody else watching the copy. If you want to know more about the book: a rather good review by J. Clute can be found at <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue313/excess.html> (Warning: Spoilers!).

He crossed the corner to the small back lane where his house stood. Yoshi dozed on the sill of a firmly closed window. A clichéd picture of quiet and peace. Seishiro looked ahead; the grey wall surrounding his estate was partially bathed in sunlight. The branches of the large trees lining the Yanaka on the other side of the lane and beyond his house already showed the first green and didn't so much as move in the afternoon sun. Not a living soul within s—

He almost halted in his steps. A painfully thin figure in a crumpled brown coat sat in front of his gate, arms folded on drawn-up legs, head tiredly resting on them. He stopped a mere step away.

"Subaru-kun?"

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
Seishiro's kitchen — 15 Minutes later

"Which is why we seldom mark our prey for good — or for any prolonged amount of time. It has a tendency to become distracting." Seishiro put the delicate glass tea cup with the engraved flower pattern down in front of Subaru before filling his own and claiming the other chair at his kitchen table. "There are two ways to silence the marks, that I am aware of," he said calmly, breathing in the sweet scent of the tea.

"And those are?" Subaru asked, picking up his own cup. The slight trembling in his fingers as they lay around the glass of the cup didn't escape Seishiro's attention. Not good. The exquisite Gyokuro tea was likely wasted on Subaru.

Seishiro sipped at his tea. He doubted that Subaru would make it through the rest of the day on his feet. "The common one is to dispose of the one bearing the mark."

"I think we both know that that would endanger the state." Subaru laid both hands around his cup. "The other?"

Seishiro put his own down.

"Giving in."

~::~::~~

"Giving in."

Subaru sat motionless, yet he couldn't stop the tea cup in his hands from shaking. Under Seishiro's calm gaze he struggled not to reach out, not to touch, to—

Once he touched Seishiro, once his magic had reunited — he wouldn't find the will to let go again. "*Giving in.*" The quiet words were ringing in his ears. His heart raced, missing beats in its flight, yet a calm, steady pulse thumped in his chest — a jarring dissonance. He blinked, turned away from the table, trying to focus. The cup fell from his hands.

Seishiro caught it before it could hit the floor. Tea sloshed onto his hand. The hot liquid on Seishiro's fingers burned Subaru's skin. He trembled. He— "I—" He slid off his chair, stood shakily, staring wide-eyed at Seishiro... at himself... "I—" He made a step... towards himself... saw himself making a step, stumbling, falling...

...into his own arms... Seishiro's arms.

The cup shattered on the kitchen floor.

He woke on the couch — its black kid leather soft under his cheek — with Seishiro's warm hand splayed wide on his shoulder beneath the cloth of his partially unbuttoned shirt.

Skin on skin. Direct contact. He blinked, dizzy, until the vague forms finally took shape.

Seishiro was sitting in front of the couch, his feet tucked under the kotatsu. He was reading a book he had propped up against its edge while maintaining the touch that — Subaru just knew — had been essential for him to wake up knowing who was he and who was Seishiro... no, to wake up at all.

He tried to sit up and his head swam with pain. Seishiro looked up from his book to throw him a questioning look. "Is it always like this?" Subaru asked, pressing a hand over his eyes.

"Only if you go too long without shielding," Seishiro said calmly. His hand moved slightly over Subaru's skin — a deliberate caress or a motion necessary after keeping a position for too long a time — before he broke the contact. A reading lamp covered the kotatsu in warm yellow light, its reflections running along the thin gold frame of Seishiro's glasses. Subaru shuddered. The sky outside the windows was black.

"How long have I been out?"

Seishiro snapped his book shut and put it on the table. "A few hours. I expected you to take longer." He stood, and an uneasy, straining pain rushed along Subaru's spine. When Seishiro left the room, he was almost sick. With a hand pressed over his mouth, he stumbled to his feet, clinging to the couch while the room spun about him, before he dared give up the hold to follow Seishiro. He didn't see his way as much as he felt the direction of lessening pain.

Seishiro frowned at him when he appeared in the kitchen door and leaned, shaking, against the door frame. "You should have stayed down."

"I couldn't..." Subaru whispered. "The marks—"

Seishiro laughed wryly. "That isn't the marks; that's your irritated nerves. They're raw from the previous strain. Right now, *any* impulse you get — from me, from yourself, from the TV remote — will make you sick." Glass from the shattered tea cup crunched under their slippers as Seishiro pushed Subaru into a chair and went to search swiftly through the kitchen cabinet. "Here. Take these." He placed two white pills in Subaru's hand.

"What is it?"

"Acetaminophen." Seishiro put a mug on the table and the distinct smell of coffee invaded Subaru's nose. "And coffee to keep them down. I suggest you take them now—" the mug was held out to him, "— and you better refrain from being sick in my house."

Seishiro had to support the mug for Subaru to wash down the pills. He labored for a while to keep them down, but gradually the sickening pain abated and he no longer felt like every word was turning his stomach. He wasn't sure whether it was because of the pills or because Seishiro had touched him again and was still in the room. "I thought it was unhealthy to mix painkillers and coffee."

"Coughing up your intestines for half a day isn't good for you, either," Seishiro returned dryly over the jingle of broken glass while he emptied the dustpan into the bin under his sink. "And that was your alternative, believe me. You should have come earlier." He gave the floor a critical once over, before wiping his hands. "It's almost two in the morning. Sleep it off."

Subaru slid off his chair, expecting the pain to return and the room to spin when Seishiro left; nothing happened. He cautiously followed Seishiro; the sound of opening closets drew him into the living room. A pile of blankets lay on the black carpet.

"I don't have visitors, so there's no guest room." Seishiro's voice came out of his bedroom.

Guest room? Subaru stared at the blankets. He'd expected Seishiro to be on the phone calling him a cab. "But I—"

"If you want to sleep in the bed, be prepared to pay for it." Seishiro returned with a red-and-black pillow under his arm; his amber stare didn't leave any doubt about what kind of payment he had in mind.

Subaru felt his face growing hot in his weariness. For once, he was sure the reaction was his own; still he shivered. He wasn't up to winning this fight and he couldn't afford losing it, either.

Seishiro shrugged and spread the blankets over the fine leather of the couch, wrapping them safely around the cushions before he tossed the pillow against an armrest. "Sleep," he said quietly. "You need it."

Subaru shook his head, put a hand to the door frame to keep himself upright and found himself glancing at the Sakura painting with its brilliant contradictory colors that now loomed over his makeshift bedstead: silent sentinel and dire warning that nothing here was what it seemed. Nothing. Not even the lies. "What's going to happen now?"

"You'll be stuck with me for a while."

"For how long?" Giving in to his exhaustion, Subaru finally sat down.

Seishiro, already in the doorway to his bedroom, looked back. "I don't know. Believe it or not, we have no experience of untrained markers, either." He switched off the light. For a brief moment his tall frame was a stark silhouette against the light, then Subaru found himself in the dark. The silk of the pillow under his head smelled faintly of sakura, tobacco, and... something else. He wasn't sure it was blood.

~::~::~~

Seishiro heard the door easing open about an hour later. New moon was in three days; so only the flicker of reverence lights on the Yanaka fell through his half-closed blinds, drawing the lines of the room in a ghostly shine against the dark. He remained silent, curious what Subaru would do. The rustle of carpet fibers under socked feet, hesitant, cautious; breaths, a little too fast and forcefully kept flat; the scraping sound of worn cloth being strained...

He kept his own breathing even; too many experiences in his youth had taught him to keep surprise on this side by not revealing that he was awake. He didn't twitch when a hand touched his arm, though the tremor in it and the faint layer of sweat were unexpected.

Fear? Probably.

He waited. Nothing else happened. The hand held tight. The breathing evened out to deep, exhausted sleep.

Finally, he sat up, studying the narrow body curled up on the floor next to his bed. "Really, Subaru-kun," he sighed, slipped out of bed, picked him up and tucked him between the sheets his own body had already warmed. "You're going to catch your death like this."

# Interregnum 1

CLAMP Campus  
University Hospital

The room smelled of antiseptic. A battery of medical equipment lined the wall above the head of the bed. So it was another one of *those* dreams.

"According to the indicators, he's awake, Imonoyama-san," the tall physician told someone outside Kakyo's range of vision, though he still couldn't figure out why he would dream of an aged Sakurazukamori being a doctor...

But then, the man was a veterinarian. And humans were mammals...

"Kuzuki-san?"

A man in a pale yellow suit with gold ornaments matching his wavy hair settled into the plastic chair next to his bed. He was young for someone who came to consult his dreams — but those were always the worst; they were ambitious.

"I'm Imonoyama Nokoru—"

Kakyo winced at the name. He hadn't known that the powerful Imonoyamas used dreamseers, but—

"I'm sure Akechi-sensei<sup>5</sup> told you already where you are and—"

*Akechi? Who is—?*

Imonoyama smiled and Kakyo waited for the first question, the first inquiry. The man was a good interrogator; his smile even reached the blue eyes.

"—tell you how you got here and what happened to you." Imonoyama leaned back. "At least, as far as we have been able to piece it together."

"You... want to tell... *me*?" Kakyo croaked in disbelief and winced at his rough, rasping voice, at his halting lines. He'd always been eloquent... in dreamspace. His voice had been well-honed and fine... in dreamspace. He was sure he hadn't changed that... in dreamspace.

"I'm sure you have many questions," Imonoyama in front of him said.

He had only one. "Is this reality?"

"I've seen it all happen — one way or the other, depending on decisions and wishes and chances." Kakyo's voice was merely a whisper, but at least a fluent whisper by now. "And in all of them the Shinken pointed to Kamui's heart and the world went white..." He turned his head to the side, staring almost desperately at the set of IV lines running across the white cloth of the pillow toward his bandaged wrist. Bandaged because of the infections the unattended needles had caused in the days after the Final Battle, before... Mono had caught on to the Twin Star's memory about him and told Imonoyama where to find him. If only it had taken him longer... "I thought it was the end of the world, the end of humanity's existence... and therefore finally mine."

"Finally?" Akechi checked the instruments above his head. "Young man, it is unwise to offend your doctor by preferring death over life."

Imonoyama in his chair laughed faintly. "You better heed that advice," he told Kakyo. "The good doctor's a frightening fellow when he feels slighted."

Kakyo drew a slow, laborious breath that made one of the health monitors briefly change its color to yellow, and told him, "Everybody always asked how the Final Battle was going to end. It didn't occur to me to ask myself whether it would end at all." He returned his attention to Akechi. "The world didn't end; humanity didn't end; but reality changed and a yumemi dreams only of the reality that *is*..." Another breath. "I don't know the dreams of this reality... yet." He escaped the room — not into a dream but into the darkness behind closed eyes. "And they will come for me and ask again. What can I do to escape but wish for my death?"

"Hasn't that wish already been granted?" Imonoyama wondered. "You said yourself: 'a yumemi dreams only of the reality that is'. Your reality ended. Nobody has to know any different."

"Instead of locking yourself in your grave, you should explore—" The doctor pushed the curtains back and the window wide and Kakyo stopped hearing their words. Wind and sunlight streamed in, blew up the curtains. The cries of gulls circling the building filled the room, together with the sharp smell of salt and oil, fish and seaweed...

"The ocean..." he whispered.

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5 Akechi Shigetaka M.D. is the school physician of CLAMP Campus. He is a character of 20 Menso ni onegai (Man of Many Faces) and if I ever saw a blue print of Seishiro's "kind veterinarian act" it's him!  
He is Ijuuin Akira's uncle and fourteen years older than Nokoru (and Seishiro in my timeline), loves eating and cooking, likes to tell anecdotes (the first one being about the hassles of getting a sakura to bloom ;), feeds sparrows inside his surgery, and has a not-so-innocent secret job & identity as well.



Edogawa, Tokyo  
Togakushi Shrine

Tattered, bleached police seals covered the place. Last summer's weeds stood dry and dead in the yard where snow and winter hadn't brought them down. The public area of the shrine had been properly maintained, but the keeper's house...

Kamui removed the last scrap of paper from the door and pushed it open. The plain movement tore at his still healing ribs, and he gasped. Fuma reached for him and he had to force himself not to shrink from his friend's touch. His friend who shared the face of the enemy. *Shared*, since four weeks ago the Final Battle had... gone *poof*. Kamui's ribs had been broken twice since then.

He avoided the touch by dragging his bag through the door. The destroyed wall had been patched up; the police likely had wanted to preserve the site of crime for further investigations.

They hadn't removed the blood.

Two people had died here; torn apart by swords that over a month ago had become dragon teeth; a dragon that had disappeared to become... *the whole*, as Subaru had tried to explain awkwardly in one of the few talks they'd had after the Sakurazukamori had disappeared.<sup>6</sup> Subaru had left soon afterward, not wanting to risk encounters with the Twin Star without Seishiro for backup. *Seishiro*. Subaru's words.

Kamui shuddered. He remembered the pain Subaru had shown him within his soul. He knew from experience what the Sakurazukamori was capable of, yet...

...he couldn't forget the image of Subaru and the Sakurazukamori together, bloodied, drained, clinging to each other as if nothing else existed.

"We should use one of the guest rooms for now." Fuma came back from his inspection of the house. "They're in much better shape."

"No." Kamui left his bag lying in the middle of the main room and went in search of cleaning utensils. "We have to clean this up."

The brush scrubbed raggedly over the already soaked wall. They would have to paint it once it was dry again, but at least the dark stains of dried blood were fading. Kamui's back ached; his arms protested and he tried hard not to think about his ribs. Fuma had insisted on doing the kitchen and — later on — the floor here. He had wanted to do more, but Kamui wouldn't let him near the bloodstained wall. Tokiko had been his aunt and he still had that picture from Hinoto's dreams in his mind: of little Fuma licking the blood from his mother's corpse off his hands—

"Stop right there!" an angry voice barked behind him, and Kamui froze, the scrubbing brush still pressed to the wall. "This is sacred ground. What do you think you're doing?"

Kamui sullenly dragged the brush a last time over the wet wall and turned slowly to face a man in his sixties waving a flashlight.

"I'm Tohime Hirose of the neighborhood committee caring for this shrine until the Mono-siblings return and—"

"May I ask why you are threatening my guest?"

"Kannushi Kyogo—" The man stuttered, shocked, then stopped. "No... Fuma-kun, is that you?"

"Tohime-sensei." Fuma nodded slowly. The old school uniform was gone; instead he wore the white shirt and blue hakama Kamui always associated with Kannushi Kyogo and the Togakushi shrine. "I thank you for maintaining the grounds during my... absence. Surely you remember Shiro Kamui?"

"Shiro... oh my! I really didn't recognize you. And there you were in my last class." He shook his head and laughed. "Where's Kotori-chan? Surely she won't stay here until the house has been cleaned and—" His words died at Fuma's grave expression.

"My sister won't return, Tohime-sensei."

"Her heart?" Tohime asked in a low voice.

Fuma nodded solemnly and Kamui winced, realizing that Fuma was telling the absolute truth. Kotori's heart had failed, failed to accommodate the Shinken the Twin Star had sunk into it. He—

"Fuma-kun, have you cut yourself?" Tohime asked suddenly. "Your cheek is bleeding."

Kamui dropped the brush.

*The divine sword nailed his hand to the concrete. "Such a nice voice... Kamui..."*

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6 Dao (and Subaru's awkward explanation of it). The 42nd stanza of the Tao Te Ching reads: "Tao begets one; One begets two; Two begets three; Three begets the myriad creatures." (TTC 42, tr. Lau, modified).

*A whisper, the purr of a deep, familiar, forbidden voice that vibrated over his skin and down his spine. It silenced his cries, numbed him when glass shards cut through his hand and shoulder, pinning him even stronger against the torn wall.*

*"The earth is wishing for a change..."*

*Blood filled his mouth, spilled over his lips. Even breaths fanned over his skin. A wet tongue licked the sensitized spot on his throat. Teeth followed. He arched back against the shards holding his hands and leg, arched into the body leaning against him. Excruciating pain... turned to— to—*

*"Fu...ma..."*

*His chin was tipped back. Brown eyes held his gaze. "A change that won't be hindered by humans." A hard body pressed him to the stone. Narrow hips pushed against his groin. The words were whispered like a caress: "For that I will kill all those who make the earth impure..."*

Arms were around him, holding him down, choking him— comforting him— Fuma kneeling on his futon, holding tight against his panicked struggle. Fuma pressing against—

Fuma. The Twin Star—

"No!" Kamui scampered back, curling up around himself, hugging himself. "Don't touch me."

"You were calling my name," Fuma said quietly. "It looked as if you were having a nightmare. I—" his voice trailed off.

"Don't touch me..." Kamui repeated with an unsteady voice, clasping his scarred hands to his chest.

"I won't. Promise." Fuma sat utterly still and Kamui realized guiltily that he was trying not to scare him even more, but wouldn't leave him alone like this, either. It had been such a close call earlier, with the Twin Star reaching for the surface in Tohime-sensei's presence, but Fuma had persevered, had reined him in. Fuma was here now. Not the Twin Star. Why couldn't he trust him then? The neighborhood people would be crowding them tomorrow. He had to trust Fuma then, hadn't he?

Quiet brown eyes looked at him with concern. "Want to talk about it?"

Kamui shook his head silently, but... "Please... don't go."

## 03 — Cold Spell

*...Yue's first and most serious opponent was of local origin; a commoner with little understanding of the refined ways of the magical arts such as Yue practiced, but exceptionally gifted. It was that extraordinary talent that allowed him to confront Yue in an extended and vicious battle...*

*...at the end of which the opponent's body and spirit were separated; the body allowed to move on and the spirit banned and contained. Contained, for though untrained, the magic that ran in the opponent's veins would have been enough to burn with sunfire whatever shoot dared suck it in.*

*...It took weeks after the victory for Yue to find the strength to actually write an account of what happened; even then he didn't bring himself to write his opponent's name and instead called him the 'Emperor's Murderer'. At first, it seemed a measure of safety not to identify the banned spirit under his guard, but later it became clear that it was the memory of his opponent's beauty that pained him...*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
February 3, 2000

Subaru woke to the sun streaming through half-closed Venetian blinds, creating highlights in narrow stripes on the black wall-to-wall carpet and glittering dazzlingly bright on the chrome and glass of the desk. Birds were clamoring outside on the barely visible trees. He'd never thought that birds could be so obnoxiously loud. They almost managed to drown out the snore—

Snore?

Subaru shivered, remembering whose bed he was in, and...

The snoring stopped. He cautiously glanced sideways and found himself looking into a pair of unreadable golden eyes. He needed a moment to come to terms with the presence of a large red tabby cat staring at him from the other side of the bed.

This was Seishiro's house, wasn't it?

The cat yawned, showing a set of needle-sharp teeth and curled up again.

Seishiro's bed, right?

The snoring resumed.

The cat was in...?

Outside, a cabinet door closed soundly. The clang of dishes came through the partially open bedroom door. More sounds became discernible, now that Subaru was actively listening. Water being poured. The ding of a toaster, and the steamy bubble of a coffee machine about to finish its business. A radio was playing faintly; someone hummed slightly off-key with the tune.

Someone... Seishiro.

Subaru struggled out of bed, earning himself a baleful stare from the cat when he forcefully disentangled himself from the twisted sheets.

He found Seishiro indeed making breakfast, moving deftly around the kitchen. Toast slices and a bowl of steaming white rice stood already on the table. The scent of miso and yamasa rose from the pot Seishiro was stirring—

"There you are. Splendid! I was about to get you. Breakfast will be done any minute."

"I really should be going—"

"Nonsense. First, you have to eat something."

Subaru slipped tentatively onto one of the chairs. A mug of steaming coffee was placed in front of him, its strong scent reminding him of yesterday's nausea. "May I have tea instead, please?" he asked uncomfortably. "I'm not—"

Seishiro unceremoniously snatched the mug back, drank from it and set it down on the other place mat before he fetched a cup and a tea box from his kitchen cabinet. "Here, help yourself." He claimed the second chair. "So... Do you feel better?"

"Y—yes." Subaru frowned. "You... put me in your bed."

"It's early February, Subaru-kun. It's too cold to sleep on the floor," Seishiro chided. "Don't worry." He ran two teasing fingertips along Subaru's jawline. "You can pay me later." Subaru jerked his head away, shooting Seishiro a dark glare.

"Pay?" He demonstratively busied himself preparing his tea. "I ought to charge you for services rendered."

Seishiro chuckled. "I'm sure we'll reach a desirable agreement."

"I don't think so," Subaru corrected. "I have—" The cooking timer shrilled and Seishiro returned to the stove. "No, I *will* go home."

"Not before you've eaten something," Seishiro declared while he filled the soup into two bowls, one of which he immediately shoved under Subaru's nose. It smelled surprisingly good.

Seishiro retook his own seat. "Itadakimasu," he said, unfolding his napkin.

Subaru swallowed and reached for the rice. "Itadakimasu," he mumbled.

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
11:17

The garden gate closed with the usual distinctive clang. For a brief moment, the lean form remained framed in the archway, then faint footsteps sounded on the stones towards the alley mouth. Seishiro turned away from the window. His glance fell on Subaru's half-eaten dish.

He hadn't been surprised when Subaru had insisted on leaving. After all, his prey had wanted to flee even yesterday night when he wouldn't have made it as far as the corner. Subaru hadn't yet grasped what the marks could do to him and that yesterday's treatment had been an emergency measure, not a remedy.

He collected the dishes, emptied them of solid remains and rinsed them briefly.

Subaru's experience in spiritual shielding should — with a few tips — allow him to maintain his sensory integrity by closing himself off from the marks completely. There would be no need to teach him how to distinguish his body's impulses from any coming through the marks, which inevitably led to the finer points of mark work: locating the mark bearer from afar or reading specific information about him.

It had taken dozens of Sakurazukamori to reach the current state of the art and even with training under optimal conditions it took years to achieve a full grasp on the marks. Some of his predecessors had never made it that far.

Seishiro sorted the dishes into the dishwasher and checked the detergent.

His own training on marks had begun when he was merely three years old, with carefully tempered spells instead of real marks to mitigate the unavoidable beginners' mistakes. Spells that could easily be lifted in case the effects threatened his life. And even then his mark training hadn't been declared finished until he was thirteen and—

A cold chill ran over his spine. He slammed the dishwasher shut, switched it on, and went to wash his hands.

Subaru wouldn't have a decade to learn. And Seishiro wasn't going to teach him much anyway. Aside from the fact that he was reluctant to give up his advantages, certain people would want his head if he taught critical techniques to a Sumeragi, especially to the head of their clan.

Something bumped energetically against his shin. Seishiro stared, annoyed, at the purring cat who was apparently determined to shove him into the kitchen sink. He pulled Yoshi up by the fur of his neck. "Just whose cat are you again?" he asked. His answer was a tenfold volume increase in purring that nearly drowned out the melodic ding from his bedroom telling him that a special mail had just arrived in his inbox. Annoyed, he dropped the cat and headed for his laptop. As if his life wasn't complicated enough at the moment. Sitting down at his desk, he called up the interface.

The message was large and strongly encrypted; decryption accordingly took quite some time even on his sophisticated system. What then appeared on the screen looked like a formal business letter including letterhead and company logo. He snorted. Emails were supposed to be *short*.

from:

Sakura Enterprises Incorporated  
- COO Sakurazuka Romiro -

to:

Sakura Enterprises Incorporated  
- CEO Sakurazuka Seishiro -

Subject: priority one case: final stage

BoD meeting - COO, CFO, CAO, CIO, CRO, CPO – today.  
Appointment time?

Sincerely, S. R. (COO)

Seishiro frowned briefly. A full 'Board of Directors' meeting without previous consultation usually meant something out of the ordinary. The set of participants was also interesting: operations, finances, analytics, information, risk assessment, and politics. The potential target had to be rather influential to cause such a stir beforehand. He threw a glance at his watch, then replied:

CONFIRMED. 1400.  
SKZM

He encrypted the message, hit Send and closed the laptop. There were a couple of things to be taken care of before that appointment; one of them was properly hiding the scars on his hands, another one was returning that purring monster to its owner. He reached for the phone. If matters continued like this, he was going to put Yoshino's number on speed dial.

~::~::~~

Kabuki-cho, Shinjuku, Tokyo  
13:28

Subaru extracted his key from the lock and looked disconcerted at his apartment before he crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him. It was exactly as it had been when he'd left yesterday. And yet...

He put his boots onto the shoe board and found the floor icy under his feet. The rooms themselves felt cold, almost uninhabited.

With a start, he realized that he'd left the balcony door ajar, allowing the chilly February night to take possession of the apartment despite the central heating system running at full force. He hurried to close it and stopped in his tracks, startled, when the wards in his bedroom sizzled at him angrily. Then he remembered the key in his coat pocket. He closed his hand around it. The metal felt warm in his palm. Seishiro had given it to him, insisting that he keep it...

"I don't intend to come back," he'd said, trying to give it back.

"And I don't expect that intention to hold," had been the dry reply. "This is a quiet neighborhood. People will notice if you sit in front of my gate again."

Subaru threw an uneasy look at the scars on his hands; pale silver lines, long healed since the Final Battle. He shuddered and finally pulled the balcony door shut. He turned his back to the outside. The light on his answering machine blinked rapidly. Several pages lay in the tray of the fax machine. He ran a hand through his hair, thinking worriedly about the pile of assignments on his desk. Recently, he hadn't been able to cope with them *and* the marks.

Still wearing his coat for warmth, he rewound the tape of the answering machine. Listening to the recorded calls, he collected the old and new facsimiles and sat on his bed to sort them out.

The topmost was from the clan's financial custodian in Kyoto who inquired if his credit card had been stolen because of the atypical amount of food and restaurant bills appearing on it since January.

He put the fax aside and checked the next. A job. A reminder about an appointment he'd failed to meet. A—

=Subaru-san, you of all people ought to be aware that Tenjin-kami is not to be slighted regarding his places of worship.=<sup>7</sup>

Subaru froze, the fax still in hand. The stern voice of his grandmother coming from the answering machine held clear disapproval.

=The Tenman-shrine at Waseda university requested its annual purification six weeks ago. Since then you have failed to appear on two appointed dates without explanation or notification. The responsible ujiko is accordingly upset, considering that the ume blossom festival is in five days. Hundreds of students will flock to the shrine to pay their gratitude for passed exams.

=We are aware that the Year of Decision put unusual strain on you, but the Final Battle was decided over a month ago. Your tardiness cannot continue. The next date for the Waseda Tenman purification is February 3, at 15:30. I expect you to be there.=

There was a pause, filled with the faint hum of the tape and the rustle of cloth, before his grandmother added much more softly, =...and Subaru-san, please, look after yourself...=

If only he knew how. If only anything had been decided. If only—

---

7 Tenjin, Tenman-gu, and ume trees. Tenjin started as a vengeful spirit at the beginning of the tenth century, bringing natural disasters over the capital of Heian until he was properly enshrined and worshipped as Tenjin-kami. Originally worshipped to placate his devastating ire, he was later recognized as the patron of scholarship. Tenjin's beloved ume trees blossom in February when exam results are announced.

Subaru froze.

February 3 was today and he'd spent the night in Seishiro's house, in Seishiro's bed, most likely in Seishiro's arms — though he had no recollection of that — at any rate he was in dire need of purification himself. For him to perform a purification ceremony was questionable at best. Fifteen-thirty. He leaped to his feet. There were less than two hours left for him to cleanse himself and get out there. But still...

*Tenjin-kami*, he begged fervently as he ran to the bathroom for the briefest ritual washing possible. *Please forgive my insufficient preparation...*

~::~::~~

Kasumigaseki-1, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
13:56

Seishiro pulled from the Sakurada-dori onto the small parking lot opposite the Sakuradamon to the Imperial Palace grounds. He stopped on one of the three lots marked with 'Sakura Enterprises', collected his briefcase from the backseat — the automatic belt check produced obnoxious reminders if he put it on the second front seat — and left the car. After a long, contemplative glance at the Metropolitan Police Department on the other side of the street, he activated the central lock and the alarm system before he headed in a brisk pace for the two storey limestone building next to the Ministry of Justice.

He eschewed the elevator and took the stairs to the second level. It was mostly habit these days; even when the nearby Yamanote line had been destroyed last year, the place hadn't suffered more than a paper mug tumbling off a desk. Romiro hadn't even found ceiling plaster in his coffee cup; a shame in Seishiro's eyes.

He pushed through the glass entrance doors with the stylized sakura flower with five swords between its petals pointing at the edges of an imagined pentagram, and tossed his coat onto the coatrack next to the reception desk. With a dazzling smile for the startled receptionist, he crossed over into the conference room.

As usual, the talking inside died the moment he opened the door. The six people present tensed and immediately claimed their seats. Identical files lay in front of each place. Glasses and a carafe with lemon water stood in the center of the oval conference table. Its ancient coloboro wood gleamed like fresh blood shot with old in the sunlight streaming through the open blinds. The projector was on, displaying their logo barely visible in the light. An employee closed the blinds. 'Sakura Enterprises Board of Directors meetings' were always meticulously prepared. An obvious benefit of the 'employees' living in fear of their unpredictable CEO. But then, he'd worked hard to keep them on their toes ever since he'd thinned out their lot and made the rest work for their money. Seishiro smiled inwardly, thinking of the uproar it had caused when he'd listed them in the Yellow Pages: "Sakura Enterprises – state-approved compostings".

"Sakurazuka-san," his chief operating officer, Sakurazuka Romiro, greeted him coolly, a touch of irony in his voice. "How nice of you to join us." They shared the family name but the relation was distant at best — and not distant enough for Seishiro's taste. "May we beg—"

Seishiro, his hand lying on the file he'd been given, signaled the office lady, Namane, to pour him a cup of black coffee. The strong, slightly metallic aroma of African Blend filled the room. She added his usual three pieces of sugar, stirred briefly and set the cup down next to his right hand. He felt the faint tingle of an expertly performed tracer spell in the coffee. Comparatively imaginative. He nodded his thanks and pointedly turned his attention to Romiro without touching the cup. "So, what do we have?"

A muscle in Romiro's cheek twitched as he called up the first slide on the screen, showing front and profile images of a middle-aged man. "Sawada Takeshi.<sup>8</sup> Forty-six. Conservative politician. Widower. One child, a son, born 1984, of no further importance for our business since he does not live with his father." Two smaller images at the bottom of the slide showed a cute youth — all legs and eyes — and an elegant woman, possibly in her thirties. "There are rumors of a female acquaintance and business contact, but no information about deeper attachment."

The slide changed and Motohiro, responsible for business and financial information, took the word. Two slides later Seishiro knew that Sawada was well-situated though not exceedingly rich by comparison and that — despite his apparent influence — the tax office had probed his books more than once.

The usual followed: the remaining speakers, according to their departments, informed him about everything they had dug up of Sawada's life since his birth certificate was issued in Nakano, forty-six years ago.

---

<sup>8</sup> Sawada is a shady character of Leeza Sei's manga series "Combination".

Roughly one and a half hours later, Seishiro knew details like Sawada's school results, his first successes in industry and marketing, and his switch to the political theater relatively late in his career followed by an astonishingly swift rise in power.

Romiro presented the last slide with a diagram summarizing Sawada's connections to politicians, business people, and organized crime. The lines between the names were either drawn black solid or red dashed, indicating confirmed or suspected connections. There were many suspicions but very few confirmed links.

"Politically, Sawada is surprisingly influential, considering that he holds only a seat in the Lower House where he has kept a relatively low profile so far." Romiro indicated one of the dashed lines on the slide. "I might add that there is actually evidence for his involvement in the real estate speculation scandal last year, but it wasn't followed up. Apparently, it paid that he took pains not to inconvenience the government."

Seishiro chuckled and poured himself a glass of lemon water. "Looks like he's inconvenienced them now." He had a sip and put the glass down again. "Any information how?"

"My guess?" Romiro snorted. "The extent of his foreign political contacts and connections established without the Cabinet's blessing is suspicious. I wouldn't be surprised if he used them in a way not sanctioned by official government policy."

Seishiro finally opened his copy of the case file and skimmed the first page. "There's nothing conclusive so far to mark Sawada as a target." He looked over the edge of his glasses at Romiro. "In fact, there's very little conclusive at all. So why are you wasting my time?"

"Because the same can be said about Sawada's spiritual abilities. I've been investigating him since the order came in two weeks ago and—" Romiro threw him a dark look. "—he's almost as elusive as you."

"I see..." Seishiro nodded.

Romiro was six years his senior and his abilities ranked second to Seishiro's own within the organization, a fact which led Seishiro to believe that he'd cut in line before Romiro when he'd accepted the Tree's offer at fifteen. A fact he was sure Romiro was very aware of. Still, two weeks and inconclusive results from Romiro suggested that Sawada's abilities exceeded Romiro's, which would make him a perfect — as in very nutritious — but also dangerous target.

"I might add," Romiro continued, "that our client explicitly demanded a traditional execution. Apparently, it is imperative to send a message to Sawada's connections that his actions are not tolerated."

"So basically they want him put out of commission in a public place with my business card through his chest." Seishiro flipped to another sheet.

"Yes, that about sums it up." Romiro nodded. "A natural death won't do this time. However, the number of unmonitored places which Sawada visits regularly is quite small. You may have—"

Burning heat seared through Seishiro's hands. He felt the illusions covering the scars on the backs wavering, destabilizing rapidly under the pressure of the fiery red glow underneath. He knocked his half-emptied glass over, splashing the lemon water onto his pants and leaped to his feet, cursing. Namane rushed forward to dab at the soaked documents.

"Excuse me." Seishiro rushed off to the lavatory.

After turning the lock, Seishiro leaned against the lavatory door for a moment, gathering his wits before he examined the flaring pentacles on his hands closely. Damn it. That had been close. He queried his own marks, found Subaru on his knees in what appeared to be a small shrine, struggling to sort through the mess of sensations: his own, Seishiro's, Seishiro feeling his sensations... For a brief moment, Seishiro had the disconcerting impression of feeling himself leaning against the bathroom door watching Subaru feeling him leaning against...

Subaru feeling him feeling Subaru feeling him feeling...

He shook his head, dizzy. *No!* Slamming his shields shut, he broke the feedback loop. The pentacles on his hands burned almost white. He put all his power into the shields until their painful glare slowly subsided, now that Subaru had to sort out only two sensations: his and Subaru's own.

With his heartbeat throbbing behind his eyes and hard breaths calming slowly, Seishiro, his back still against the door for support, admitted that their problem was bigger than expected.

"Sakurazuka-san?" Someone knocked persistently against the lavatory door. "Is everything alright?"

Much bigger. Seishiro tried to rebuild the concealment spells on his hands; when that failed he drew on the Tree's resources, aware that it wouldn't go unnoticed for long.

The knocking rhythm changed. "Sakurazuka?" Romiro.

Dabbing his still-wet pants with a paper towel, he exited the bathroom, brushing past Romiro and the disquieted office lady with a frown. "Can't a man even dry his pants in peace in this house?"

Returning to the conference room, he immediately stubbed the now damp and slightly wavy file sheets into some semblance of order and tossed them into his briefcase. He had to get out of here before any of the

executives present — especially Romiro — noticed he was working illusions on them. "I'll look into it." He snapped the case shut and turned for the door.

Romiro blocked his path. "Sakurazuka-san, surely you—"

He met the grey gaze calmly, contemplating getting a new COO.

Romiro backed off and Seishiro pushed past him, taking his coat with a smile from a flustered receptionist.

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

23:48

Seishiro eased the house door shut and locked it, blinking briefly when the hallway lights came on. The pain in the marks had gradually subsided to the distracting itch of healing burns. Leaving his coat on the rack, he slipped off his shoes and went up the stairs in search of his not quite unexpected 'guest'. The Tree had told him around eight in the evening that somebody had passed his wards and Subaru's was the only other key beside his own.

He found him on the couch, out like a light. After administering a weak sleeping spell to make sure Subaru stayed that way, he headed into his bedroom, put the briefcase next to his desk and shrugged out of his jacket. Yawning, he fumbled with unsteady fingers on the collar clip. It had grown late; Romiro's shikigami had followed him for over six hours after he'd left Kasumigaseki and spending six hours straight holding onto his shields for dear life had taken its toll. He noted the faint pain in his shoulder and back when he finally stretched after getting his tie loose. Damn, he was getting old.

Running his fingers wearily through his hair, he brushed the unruly strands out of his face and looked back towards the living room. He had yet to find out what to do about the problem still lying fast asleep on his couch.

He couldn't risk something like today again, and with a case like Sawada's on his hands, he couldn't delay things indefinitely, either. He would have to teach Subaru a better grip on the marks, no matter the consequences.

But mark work was intimate. If Subaru lost control like he had in their tryst at Imonoyama's while they were working the marks... that would do more than just scratch the skin off Seishiro's back. And if things went badly wrong, how would either of their deaths affect the Dao? He had to take precautions against that, but the prey he'd come to know years ago had grown into a man whose reactions didn't quite make sense to him. He couldn't afford such ignorance any longer. Pushing his weariness back, Seishiro went to get his paraphernalia.

After washing his hands, Seishiro placed the daggers and a set of fuda next to the couch, then dipped his fingers briefly into the thinned sandalwood oil, spreading it over his palms to sensitize them. If everything went well, he would need neither daggers nor fuda. If.

Concentrating, he first checked the sleeping spell, then began to test Subaru's energy centers. Touching three fingertips to Subaru's forehead, he felt for the upper tanden and the five secondary tan tien it was comprised of.<sup>9</sup> He found them all well; the spiritual center was impeccable. Not really a surprise considering the extensive meditations the Sumeragi expected of their clan head. The emotional information of the middle tanden should be more interesting.

He laid his hand solidly against Subaru's abdomen. Deep, even breaths moved the surprisingly hard muscles separated from his palm merely by a thin shirt. The heart pulsed steadily beneath the tip of his middle finger, but there was no unbalance – Subaru's yin and yang complemented each other exactly. Given a choice he'd never start a fight but he would fight if he had to and there was enough yang to make him a formidable opponent in that case.

Seishiro spread his fingers, searched deeper and frowned. He had expected an unbalance if not a malfunction here, given the heated rage with which Subaru had bloodied his back at Imonoyama's, but he felt nothing untoward in this tanden. The reason had to be elsewhere, in the remaining lower tanden. But not much in the carnal center could account for such a frenzy. What was it?

Sliding his hand beneath Subaru's lower back, Seishiro applied just enough pressure to feel the lower tanden through the cloth. As expected, there was no yin in Subaru's sex; his element wasn't Earth. But there was also no yang, no Heaven. He wasn't grounded, but would never be the one to take the initiative, either. It just wasn't in him. But what was? Seishiro sensed further, reaching for the secondary centers indicating the less likely elements — and froze.

---

9 tanden, tan tien. Energy centers in Taoism, comparable to the chakras in tantra. The details vary a lot depending on the system of belief: <http://www.kheper.net/topics/chakras/chakras.htm>



Water and Fire. Both were ambivalent in their properties, being yin and yang at the same time. Liquid Fire. He ran his hand slowly across the tanden, searched for other components and found none. Pure liquid fire — yielding passion — heaven on earth for a strong partner.

With an unconscious, frightened whimper Subaru arched away from the continuing touch. Seishiro frowned at the sudden disquiet. In front of him Subaru moaned in a restless, dream-disturbed sleep. Seishiro swiftly brushed across a higher tanden, calming him, soothing the arousal and the fright.

Subaru was afraid. For whatever reason he feared the passion and tried to suppress it. Because of his experience in meditation he was successful, until someone pushed past his mental barriers. Seishiro had seen at Imonoyama's what happened then. He propped an elbow on the edge of the couch and wearily rested his forehead in his hand. At least that wouldn't affect the marks in the beginning. Still...

He felt Subaru's body touching his arm in the slow, steady rhythm of breathing.

He closed his eyes. Just a moment, a respite, now that the scars had stopped burning...

His head slid off his palm. The pillow underneath his cheek was warm... moving...

## 04 — November Haze

*~The sister of the Emperor's Murderer was a vile and beautiful woman.*

*~Instead of mourning her fallen brother, she used the beauty she'd shared with him to spread her legs for the most influential of men — a prince of Imperial descent.*

*~While her lowly origin prevented the born son from inheriting imperial titles, it secured him and his vixen mother a rank and a title, an official status and a proper estate in Heian<sup>10</sup> — for all those who henceforth went by the name*

*...Sumeragi.<sup>11</sup> ~*

The Tree's crown quivered. The chronicle still lay in the hollow among its boughs where Yue had left it. Only a few of the Sakurazukamori succeeding him had been allowed to read it. In almost two-hundred years, Seishiro had been the first.

The Tree hummed. It remembered how Yue had sat on its roots, carefully working the brush, creating dainty looking symbols that somehow told the tale for those to come after him. It had prodded the edge of the paper with a blossom-cushioned twig after Yue had put the brush aside and leaned back, only to find the twig being batted away with a warning about the ink. It had sunk another, bare twig into the back of his collar, scraping across his neck, curling forward around his larynx...

It remembered his quiet voice much later, explaining the symbols. His laughter about its attempts to draw with sap. Sap hadn't been sufficiently dark; blood on the other hand...

Sakyo-ku, Kyoto

November 20, 1991 (Wednesday)

The house was comparatively new, less than ten years old. The purification performed when it was built could still be felt from where Subaru knelt on the floor boards in the second storey — right under the slanted roof. When he began, the sun had been shining through the windows embedded in it; now it was nearing midday and clouds had taken the sky, filling the window reflections in the water bowl in front of him. The ofuda, tied to the daggers planted left and right of it, fluttered in an unseen, unfelt wind. Subaru focused more strongly and began another, more powerful incantation. Sweat that had formed on his brow an hour ago was drying and itched on his skin. The exorcism was difficult, because the spirit not only wanted to be here, but was actually wanted here.

The child in the crib stirred. The click of a tongue calmed it. A book was closed with finality and wise old eyes looked at Subaru across the mirror of the water bowl. "Young man, the fact that you are lonely doesn't entitle you to force everybody else to be lonely, too!" The old woman in her decent traditional kimono straightened to her full height, reaching barely up to his chin...

...and dissolved in a whisper of gossamer and dust.

Subaru bowed his head. "Sayonara, obaa-s—"

"Obaa-chan!" The little boy in the crib wailed; his tiny fists curled tight around the edge of the lattices. "Obaa-chan!" His wide, frightened eyes stared at Subaru. "Mama! The bad man has taken obaa-chan!"

The child wept. The mother hastened to chastise him, but Subaru intervened. "It's alright." *He's right.*

Subaru placed a protective ofuda above the crib and left the house and the relieved but entirely embarrassed mother a few moments later. The cries of the family's only son were still ringing in his ears. Cries for the banished spirit, who'd given a grandmother's warmth to a lonely child and read fairy tales from his favorite book.

*"Young man, the fact that you are lonely doesn't entitle you to force everybody else to be lonely, too!"*

The spirit's words, the chiding of a dead grandmother, still held more warmth than his own grandmother had for him these days.

He stepped down onto the garden path. The clouds overhead promised rain and there was no wind to ease the thick, heavy air lying over the old city. Late November — too late for the beauty of the autumn leaves, too early for the crisp clarity of winter. A time of in-between. In between... like his sister's wandering spirit.

---

<sup>10</sup> Heian, the old name of Kyoto, became the Japanese capital in the Heian era (794 — 1185)

<sup>11</sup> The kanji for Sumeragi is a symbol for emperor; in meaning it could be something along the lines of "Of Imperial Descent".

Tomorrow, it would be a hundred days since Hokuto died. Tomorrow...

In the house behind him, the little boy was still crying.

Subaru hoisted the strap of the satchel holding his paraphernalia further up his shoulder. It was slipping down more often these days. His grandmother complained about his posture and reminded him to eat more regularly — he kept failing in both. She didn't know about the nights he spent awake searching for Hokuto's spirit.

He spotted his driver waiting outside the client's house at the sidewalk. Sumeragi Hamamatsu leaned, arms crossed, against the car. He tried to look intimidating with his size and grim demeanor, but it didn't work. There just wasn't enough power or intelligence behind the dark face to leave any impression. Not like—

Subaru clenched his fist around his satchel's strap, and crossed onto the sidewalk heading for the car. A rear door was held open for him; his return acknowledged with a proper bow. Subaru knew he had no choice but to enter.

They weren't taking chances with him any longer. He put his satchel on the seat next to him and leaned back to look quietly out of the window at the cars moving slowly through this residential neighborhood in east Kyoto. The air smelled of car and leather polish; outside it had smelled of wet wood and leaves.

"Subaru-san, please fasten your seat-belt," his driver said sternly. "We cannot depart until you do so."

Subaru wondered if they would really stay where they were indefinitely if he refused to put on his belt. But most likely not, most likely it would be put on him at some point.

It was easier to comply.

The buckle clicked. The engine whirred up and the heavy car threaded itself into the traffic.

"Did something happen, Subaru-san?" Hamamatsu inquired.

*"Mama! The bad man has taken obaa-chan!"*

The first thick drops of rain splattered on the windshield and Hamamatsu switched on the screen wipers.

"No," Subaru said monotonously into their irregular back and forth. "Nothing untoward happened."

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
November 21, 1991

Smoke welled from the large fire bowls surrounding the inner yard. Yesterday's rain and the overall humidity afterwards had wetted the wood pellets. Dark clouds billowed outside, following the arriving guests into the house where numerous censers added scented smoke to the sooty haze. Like the fires outside, they were part of the purification. Today the household's mourning ended. The stain of death that had come over the clan would be removed by fire and salt. Since August 14, the kamidana had been safely sealed in rice paper to protect it from the impurity. In the evening Subaru, as thirteenth head of the clan and their spiritual leader, would take off his mofuku and light the reverence lamps in front of Amaterasu and the other kami.

He welcomed the mourning guests at the entrance to the great hall, where a table with offerings had been set up. He thanked them for their presence and offerings at the funeral and handed out the returning gift in Hokuto's name. His hands did not tremble when he gave the next marked envelope to elder Shihoko and received the proper bow in return. Subaru answered her bow a moment late, earning himself a frown. His grandmother's wheelchair stood next to him; she welcomed the guests on her own after they'd paid him their condolences. He fought the tremor in his hands, not wanting her to notice his fatigue.

He had tried to find Hokuto again last night, as he had tried every night since the forty-ninth day after she died, when her spirit was supposed to have entered eternity. Since then he had gone on four hours of sleep every night, sometimes less...

...and still no results, no trace of his sister, neither here nor there. Where could she be? What could have happened to her? Had the Sakurazukamori done more than just kill her?

He should be in Tokyo, in Ueno searching for his sister; instead he was in Kyoto, handing out gifts in her name and memory, all the while knowing that she wasn't where she should be. It was a lie, an illusion of normalcy where there was only pain and regret.

He bowed, giving his thanks for the next guest's attendance, when a sharp, disapproving voice behind him told his grandmother that, "A head of the clan shouldn't lower himself to hand out the token for a deceased girl of no talent."

"He's young and she was his sister, Shihoko-san." Subaru heard his grandmother say firmly. "We can hardly forbid him to honor her memory as her brother."

"Still, it isn't appropriate," Shihoko insisted.

"Let me care about the proprieties in *my* house," his grandmother said coldly. "As I see, you *did* accept the end-of-mourning token from his hands, didn't you?"

"Elder Shihoko ought to know when to keep her voice down," the man in front of him said in a low voice, taking the envelope from Subaru's hands.

Surprised, Subaru looked up, recognizing Omi Tono after a moment. They'd met a couple of times; Omi worked the rural western districts of Tokyo prefecture; an unobtrusive man with moderate abilities. Subaru answered his wry smile with a solemn nod.

He sighed silently after Omi had moved on. It was going to be a long day. Keeping one's voice down wasn't the same as reconsidering one's opinion. The skin at the base of his neck prickled; looking back, he spotted elder Shihoko, staring at him from across the room while conversing with other clan members. He bowed to the next guest, suppressing another sigh. A very long day.

Night was falling outside when the last guests finally left and the large house became silent. Silent, except for the ancient wood creaking as it cooled in the dark, except for the tatami rustling under quietly placed feet of servants brushing the strewn salt away. He was weary. The shikifuku was like a dead weight on his shoulders, trying to drag him down to the floor... and deeper. He carefully observed the rites, dropping to one knee, rinsing hands and mouth with water, before he unbound the band of prayer beads running around his collar.

With uneasy fingers, he fumbled at the strings holding the garment in place. It took some time before he got the knots loose and carefully removed the coat. He would have to put it on again after divesting himself of the mofuku that he still wore underneath. He looked down at his arms. The plain black silk obscured them in a darkness that was only eased by the light falling in from the main hall. Hiding in the dark... Living in darkness...

The shikifuku creased in his hands. He couldn't bring himself to untie the mofuku, to touch the kamidana. He couldn't. He—

"Sumeragi-sama?"

He raised his head, startled. "Yes?"

A maid was kneeling in the open shoji to the main hall. "Sumeragi-dono requests your presence regarding urgent clan matters."

"Now?" he asked in disbelief. Surely his grandmother knew...

"Yes." The maid bowed deeply.

Subaru gathered himself up. Passing the door, he caught the disapproving glance the maid threw at him. He shouldn't be wearing mofuku any more.

"Subaru-san." His grandmother acknowledged him with a formal nod after he sat down on the cushion opposite her. "I take it that you are well."

"I am well, grandmother," he answered in a low voice, carefully schooled not to reveal weariness or pain.

"You haven't changed yet," she remarked. "Mofuku isn't the appropriate dress for this occasion, Subaru-san."

"I'm sorry, grandmother. I haven't had the time before your call."

She nodded and offered him tea. He accepted the tiny bowl with the required formality, wetted his lips with the green liquid and waited for her to continue.

"I've been informed that your injuries are completely healed. We are relieved that the titanium strut in your arm had no detrimental effect on your performance."

"It was only a hindrance until the muscles had rebuilt." He put the tea bowl down, resting his hands calmly on his thighs.

"I see." She waved for a maid to remove the tea bowls and waited for the girl to leave the room afterwards. The shoji was closed. All the shoji were closed. "Since your sister is no longer among us—"

Subaru almost winced.

"—and our enemy has demonstrated a clear advantage over you—"

Subaru's throat tightened.

"—the clan can no longer afford to make concessions regarding your youth."

Concessions? "What do you mean, grandmother?"

"Subaru-san, you have the strongest spiritual gift born into the Sumeragi clan for a very long time. More so, you are a twin—"

This time, Subaru did wince.

"—and there are peculiarities regarding twins in our line that, so far, allowed us not to burden you with certain necessities, especially at your tender age. However, that is no longer an option. The responsibility for preserving the exceptional gift of your line for the clan can no longer rest with your sister."

November 22, 1991 — 04:28

The shoji to the garden were closed. November in Kyoto was too cold to keep them open. Subaru lay on his futon. Light from the inner hall fell in a long trace across his room, across his legs. The fusuma were kept open despite the draft; they were keeping him within sight. There were always eyes on him these days. Eyes, judging, guarding, expecting... He rolled onto his side, turning his back to the open shoji. Servants moved outside in the hall, undoubtedly instructed not to disturb him right now. The reverence lights flickered in the dark. Somebody had unwrapped the kamidana and lit them while he'd been at his grandmother's.

*"You will marry, Subaru-san."*

The polished kanji on Amaterasu's board in the center of the kamidana danced in the uneasy light, mocking him.

Suddenly, he smelled wet wood and leaves...

An owl was crying...

...calling him to his feet in the small hours of dawn when the last of the servants had gone to bed.

Sitting, cross-legged, behind a gap of the shoji, Subaru watched the first dim light turn the morning fog into silver veils. The gap was narrow, merely the width of a finger; any wider and the guards patrolling the estate outside would notice and bother him with inquiries.

He didn't want to explain himself. In fact, he didn't know if he even could; he had tried to explain himself far too often to people who lacked the basic discernment necessary to understand his reasons. He'd never realized how thin the true gift was scattered among those surrounding him...

The guard finally crossed around the corner. Subaru pushed the shoji aside and slipped out onto the engawa. Dark clothes, fit for the mourning he was no longer supposed to observe, also hid him well in the uneasy light of an autumn morning that already smelled of the winter to come. He slid the shoji back into its place and silently edged across the engawa. The fog had covered the dark floor in dew; he left wet footprints behind where his flat-soled shoes touched the oiled wood.

After jumping down to the yard — scandalously outside the warded steps — he kept close to the bushes and conifers until he'd passed the garden lake and clambered over the stones where the estate swept down towards the Oi river.

Before his initiation in Tokyo, Hokuto and he had sometimes climbed over the wall there and escaped down to the river, searching the tiny silver fish in the shallow parts further down the stream. They'd been six or seven. He remembered her laughter when she had caught one and dropped the pitiful creature down the back of the shikifuku he'd still been wearing. He'd squeaked at the cold, slippery something twitching down his spine and — trying desperately to get rid of it — had slipped and fallen onto his backside in the muddy, ankle-deep water. Hokuto had nearly toppled in after him, she'd been laughing so hard.

The path leading down to the river was barely visible in the thick shrubs. Overgrown and abandoned. It was a long time ago that two children had run down to the river, going after the fish—

He'd been thoroughly soaked with mud-brown water that day and grandmother had scolded him afterwards, about his disrespect for propriety, for the holy symbols he'd dirtied.

But she hadn't talked about the frightened fish, which must have been terrified before escaping back into the Oi. She hadn't talked about Hokuto—

He balled his fist, left the path to the right and made his way through the undergrowth towards the street and the bus stop...

Sakyo-ku, Kyoto (East)

Shimogamo Shrine

Two hours later

Tall evergreen trees lined the path. The forest growing around Shimogamo was the last piece of true wilderness left within Kyoto's boundaries.<sup>12</sup> It had never been cut, never been planted or pruned. Even after burning down in the thirteenth century together with the shrine it protected it had rebounded on its own.

With every step along the path winding itself towards the shrine, the undergrowth became thicker. Morning fog still hung about the path, as if the trees held the clouds captive. Subaru was glad when the bright red of Shimogamo's torii finally gleamed through the fog and the foliage.

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<sup>12</sup> Shimogamo shrine & Tadasu no Mori. The Shimogamo Shrine is believed to date back to the 6th century. The joining sakura trees in front of one of its gates exist. The forest on its premises, Tadasu no Mori, is less than a kilometer long and only about 250 meters wide at its broadest spot.

It was too early for Shimogamo to have opened its gates to the public and the paths on its premises were still deserted except for the occasional animal and spirit to flit across and disappear into the ever-changing shadows of the surrounding forest.

Subaru could visit the shrine outside the common opening times. Shimogamo would always welcome a Sumeragi. His family had placated the gods when they had been about to destroy the young settlement in which his clan had taken its residence — not that he knew why the gods had been angry or why his family had been bestowed with the rank and the residence in the first place. The first chronicle spoke of "imperial honor and gratitude" but it was rather vague on details.

The gate was framed by the famous twin sakura that bent towards each other and became one in the height. Their leaves were already falling, revealing the rough black bark underneath. Subaru froze. For a moment, he saw in their stead another tree with a single mighty trunk that plunged its bloodthirsty roots deep into the soil and—

An owl called in the depths of the dark trees beyond the shrine. The fog still hung in the air in the ancient wood, keeping the area dark, cold and ominous.

'Tadasu no Mori' it was called, the forest to reveal lies, the forest to find the truth.

Truth was what he sought. And feared. He followed the path around the shrine and back among the trees. The fog clung to his clothes, following him, thickening around him; the trees, tied together by impenetrable undergrowth left and right of the path, closed in and became obscured in the earth-bound clouds.

"*You will marry, Subaru-san,*" his grandmother's voice whispered behind him.

Startled, he turned, a hand closing around an ofuda in his pocket, but there was no one, only the swirling fog.

"*Young man, the fact that you are lonely doesn't entitle you to force everybody else to be lonely, too!*"

But he'd banned the old woman's spirit—

"*I take it that you are well,*" his grandmother said casually. "*Now that your sister is no longer among us.*"

"That is not true!" he cried out, hurt.

...*True...true...true...* echoed back through the fog. The owl called again. Lonely. Seeking. Belonging to a place older than he, older than the Sumeragi. He'd come to find the truth within the forest's boundaries, to hear his own thoughts again, because the expectations of his clan drowned him out at home, but... wasn't home also an illusion then?

An illusion like the one that bound him to the cherry tree?

Black roots at the border to the realm of Death had thrown him back, tearing the shikifuku while leaving the mofuku underneath intact. Had the Sakura kept him from reaching Hokuto? Or from reaching too far?

Hokuto had died in his stead, for him. Venturing into the realm of Death... that wasn't what she'd wanted for him.

"*What do you want, Subaru?*" Hokuto's voice said behind him. He turned again and the undergrowth closed around him. Leaves and twigs caught in his clothes and hair, scratched over his face.

...*what do you want... want... want?...* echoed the fog around him.

*To kill him,* he rebelled.

...*Really?...* whispered the traitorous voice behind him into his ear. ...*Why?...*

"He killed my sister!" he insisted as he struggled against the tangled undergrowth that trapped him.

...*Why?...* The fog brushed cold wet fingers across his nape.

Subaru whirled, lashed out at it. Laughter surrounded him. "She went instead of me!"

A breath against his cheek. ...*Why?...*

"I'm her brother!" He froze.

...*brother...brother...brother...* echoed the fog, rippling around him. Streaks of light were breaking through its veils. Leaves moving in the morning breeze glittered in the sun. The path was a mere step beside him. A last feather of fog whispered over his skin. ...*What do you want?...*

He slowly, consciously opened his fists, relaxing his hands finger by finger away from the wet cloth of his shirt.

"I want to mourn my sister."

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
Early Afternoon

Subaru went to see his grandmother wearing the deep black silk of the mofuku again, no other colors, no embroidery other than the crest of five tiny pentacles at the end points of a larger pentacle that was woven directly into the silk on the right side of his chest. He was mourning his sister and he wasn't done yet. He — the brother she'd died for — not the clan head he'd had to be since she'd died.

The house had been in uproar when he'd returned three hours ago, with muddy shoes, wet clothes and leaves sticking in his hair. Security had rushed out on the street when they spotted him coming down from the bus stop. He hadn't taken the route over the wall again. This was his home, his house, wasn't it? He'd entered through the door, ignoring inquiries by voices hardened by concern. His grandmother had waited on the engawa and it had taken all his strength not to react to her reproachful look.

"Grandmother," he'd greeted her respectfully. "Please excuse my appearance. I will speak with you once I've changed."

The maid, helping her with the chair in the house, had gasped when he'd walked past them, leaving wet footprints on the dark wood.

"Subaru-san," his grandmother had said at his back. "Do you know how worried we were?"

He'd closed his eyes at the quiet scolding and pretended not to hear.

Now he sat again in his grandmother's rooms, like he'd sat less than twenty-four hours ago. This time, no tea was offered to ease the graveness of the situation. No tea wanted, either. He had stated his point. He would state it again and again if he had to.

"A year?" His grandmother looked at him in utter disbelief. "Subaru-san, do you know what ensuring your safety costs each day? You put a considerable burden on the clan with your request. We have to keep the security measurements in place until—"

"Drop them. They won't stop Sei— the Sakurazukamori anyway."

His grandmother winced. "You are a kind boy, Subaru-san, and there are options which perhaps have not occurred to—"

"Obaa-san." He said it patiently. "I've been there. I've seen, felt, *experienced* what he can do if he chooses to and none of this—" His gesture was meant to cover the whole estate. "—will stop him."

"You are too calm about a matter of—"

Subaru shrugged. "He won't come for me anyway."

"You can't be sure of that. The Sakurazukamori—"

"—could have killed me that day," Subaru reminded her quietly. "He had ample time and he didn't."

His grandmother studied him for a moment. "Do you believe he feels something for you?" she asked softly. "Subaru-san, the Sakurazukamori is incapable of that. He—"

"I know." Subaru interrupted her calmly. "He *told* me." He waited a moment to let her absorb the reminder that he, not she, knew the Sakurazukamori in person. "Obaa-san. He won't kill me because I'm not worth the bother. Hokuto offered herself in my stead and he accepted the offer. For him *it is over*." Feeling his voice quiver, he drew a deep breath; then he raised his head and faced the *former* head of the Sumeragi squarely.

"I will mourn my sister properly *for a full year*. I won't contemplate marriage or anything related with it until then." He stood, bowed and turned to leave. "And drop the security. I don't need it."

"Subaru-san," his grandmother asked quietly at his back. "Do you *wish* to die by his hand?"

He almost faltered in his steps. Almost. In his heart he did; in the world he kept going, left the room, and closed the shoji behind him... without looking back.

## 05 — Spring Thaw

He lay on its roots, gasping for breath. His pale body was covered in symbols drawn in burgundy and crimson: dried and fresh blood forming the characters the Tree had learned from him. Characters that were written fluently across his skin by the Tree's dancing twig.

*...Heat. Obsession...*

The rough bark abraded the skin on his neck to dip into the living ink and draw the next characters...

*...Power. Play...*

The Tree shivered. Blood characters were a kind of mark all by themselves.

Marks on skin. Marks in the flesh—

*...Control. Lust...*

Yue cried out.

A mighty bough that had been a twig writing on skin in the sixth century curled in memorized movements. A rain of petals danced through the eternal maboroshi. The Tree remembered another character drawn in blood many years later.

*...Politeness...*

The wide crown quivered in amusement. Such an odd choice, so compelling in its simplicity.

*"It is polite to ask, right?"* Seishiro had asked that night with fascinatingly wicked innocence.

Now, twenty years later, alone in its maboroshi the Tree finally answered: *...that depends on who's asking...*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
February 4, 2000

The first thing he noticed was that his body was warm while his feet felt cold; the second was that there was light filtering dimly through the partially screened window. Seishiro's living room. He'd waited on the couch and— Subaru blinked drowsily and pressed a hand over his aching eyes. It had been ages since he'd dropped off like that somewhere. Had he slept all night? Hadn't Seishiro come home—?

One of the lumps under his spine stirred. What!? Something nuzzled against his belly. Raising his head from the armrest, Subaru looked down along his front and found Seishiro, sound asleep, kneeling on the carpet in front of the couch and hugging him like a teddy bear.

Subaru almost giggled at the determined expression with which Seishiro held on. Like a spoiled child.

Short stubbles covered the normally impeccably smooth chin, each tiny hair casting a minuscule shadow in the gently slanting light of earliest morning. It was normal, ordinary... somehow it made the man more real. Subaru felt his fingertips itch, wanting to touch that stubbled skin, feel its roughness... He'd seen Seishiro sleeping before, but not like this — unshaven, unguarded, with tousled hair that mussed where it was caught under his temple. Seishiro's eyes moved behind his lids. Was he dreaming? And if so, of what? Of death and destruction, blood, lost souls, and sakura? Of other things? Happier things?

Seishiro murmured something and stirred, changing his hold. Subaru stilled at the sight of Seishiro's right hand that now lay splayed wide on his belly. The pentacle on its back was an angry red burn, torn and blistered as if a branding iron had been taken to the tormented skin. Subaru swallowed, thinking how it must have hurt Seishiro; how *he* must have hurt Seishiro. To think that marks could inflict injuries such as these...

Had Seishiro known he could be hurt like that? Was that why he'd retreated from him at Imonoyama's despite knowing that they had to *'continue'*, to keep the Final Battle undecided?

Subaru cautiously shifted himself a bit higher. There was a crick in his neck from sleeping in such an uncomfortable position, but he didn't want to wake Seishiro by getting up right now. He let his fingertips ghost over the hand on his belly, careful not to touch the burns. The scars on his own hands hadn't even itched yesterday, but Seishiro's hand recoiled at the lightest brush. Afterward the scent of sandalwood hung in the air. Subaru frowned. Something gleamed on the floor behind Seishiro's legs. Craning his neck, he spotted daggers and a scattered set of ofuda. What had Seishiro been doing?

*"The common way is to dispose of the one bearing the marks."*

Did it work the other way round, too? Could Seishiro unmark himself if he—?

Slowly, Subaru pushed his hand into his pocket, reaching for an ofuda of his own.

Tension seeped into Seishiro's arms holding him. The next mumbled groan was cut short. Subaru, forcing his breath to remain even, closed his hand around the ofuda in his pocket and pretended to be asleep. He



felt Seishiro propping himself hard against the couch to get to his feet. Peeking through his lashes, he saw him pressing a hand to the small of his back as he collected ofuda and daggers from the floor before going next door. A moment later, the bathroom door closed. When he could hear the hum of an electric shaver, Subaru got up. With a glance towards the open bedroom door and the bathroom beyond, he padded to the kitchen.

First sunlight already reached across the garden wall, drawing a streak of light across the kitchen cabinets. Subaru filled the water cooker and switched it on, then began searching for the tea box. He had to stretch to retrieve it from the top shelf of the second hanging cabinet he examined. He couldn't find cups or bowls, but a collection of mugs was on the lower shelf. A yellow one stood right in the band of sunlight, gleaming at him. He put it together with the tea box onto the kitchen counter and sat down to wait for the water to boil.

Seishiro's kitchen had changed little since he'd been here last year. A basket with oranges now occupied the window sill; a bunch of opened letters stuck between it and the pane. A used glass stood near the sink. Yesterday's morning paper lay on the stool at the door. The calendar with the penguins was gone, replaced by one with space photographs. February showed a crescent Earth. It looked fragile, breakable in the deep black of the surrounding space. The date field underneath held no notes.

Outside, a door opened and closed. The sound of a drawer followed...

The water cooker hissed and switched itself off. Subaru returned to the counter to infuse his tea.

Seishiro's hair was damp when he entered the kitchen, clean-shaven and in a fresh shirt. The marks on his hands looked like they had the previous morning: pale silvery scars, barely visible on his skin when he reached up to turn on the radio news. *Illusion*, Subaru realized. *He's working an illusion about them.*

"Good morning, Subaru-kun." Seishiro threw a look out the window. "I fear toast will have to do for today's breakfast. I kind of missed my alarm." He was gone from the room before Subaru had a chance to say anything.

Subaru blinked. No comment about yesterday's events. Nothing regarding his reappearance in Seishiro's house. As if he hadn't left the day before at all. As if everything was...

...as it should be.

It wasn't. Subaru had seen the scars, had seen the magical equipment laid out. The daggers and the ofuda were aggressive items, even more so in Seishiro's brand of magic; sandalwood on the other hand was a reverence oil used for intricate, sensitive work that practically excluded harmful application. Even in the Tantric vamachara<sup>13</sup>, with its focus on ritualizing the forbidden, sandalwood indicated safe practices. It didn't make sense.

Subaru's scars itched suddenly. Alarmed, he looked up and spotted Seishiro outside, fetching the morning paper stuck in the curled steel rods of the gate. They were less than twenty meters apart and already he felt the marks calling to him, telling him of the burn on Seishiro's hands and a dull ache in his back that didn't show in his posture.

Twenty meters! Subaru turned away from the window, resting his head in his hands. Most buildings were larger than that. What would happen if they were at opposite sides of town? Would it be as bad as yesterday or even worse? He didn't know enough to prevent something like that on his own, and—

Seishiro tossed the paper onto the table. The plump cat from yesterday strayed in behind him, flopped onto the warm spot near the stove, where the sunlight already reached the floor and began licking its ruffled fur back into order. Seishiro, busying himself with setting up toaster and coffee machine, ignored it. He took a mug from the cabinet to pour himself a coffee and the sunlight glowed on his shirt, turning it soft pink instead of white, tempting to touch—

Subaru focused his attention squarely onto his place set, clasping his hands together beneath the table. "We have to talk about yesterday," he said quietly. "I— we can't risk something like that happening again."

"I second that." Seishiro put a platter with toast and ham on the table and took the other chair. Subaru gave him a skeptical look. He hadn't expected Seishiro to be reasonable. "I couldn't help but notice yesterday's lapse." Seishiro bit into a toast, chewing calmly, before he continued. "It's not as if I didn't warn you. These things—" He indicated the scars on his hands. "—can kill you, you know?"

"It might have helped if you had pointed that out."

"I considered it obvious." Seishiro put his toast down. "It didn't occur to me that you'd go straight to offer yourself—"

"The Waseda Tenman-gu had made the appointment with the main house six weeks in advance. I had already delayed it twice. Tenjin-kami is a vengeful god, who rose to godhood by blackmailing the emperor of

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13 Tantra is often divided into dakshinachara and vamachara (Right-Hand Path and Left-Hand Path). Dakshinachara consists of traditional practices such as meditation, while vamachara additionally includes sexual rituals, consumption of intoxicants, animal sacrifice and flesh-eating. Both paths are viewed as valid approaches to enlightenment; vamachara, however, is considered to be the faster and more dangerous of the two.

his time with natural disasters until he was properly worshiped." Subaru drew a deep breath, feeling his composure slipping. "I couldn't possibly displease—"

"Yes, I'm sure Tenjin was especially pleased that you fell on his shrine," Seishiro retorted. "Though I don't recall him being keen on human sacrifices."

"*Tenjin?*" Subaru leaped to his feet, shoving the chair back. "Tenjin's the least of my problems!" He raised his hands, displaying the scars on their backs. "These are! The Tenman-gu isn't the first appointment I couldn't keep. Since January I haven't been able to keep up with my schedule properly. My grandmother's asking questions I have no idea how to answer. The Final Battle is no longer an excuse; she still exists, so she has drawn her own conclusions about the outcome. Do you want to tell her that she's wrong, that it's anything but decided? That to keep it that way a part of my magic is forever embedded in the murderer of my sister who crippled her?"

"Sure," Seishiro said, buttering a new slice of toast. "Get her on the phone."

Subaru stared at him. Then he slowly reclaimed his chair. "I shouldn't expect someone like you to understand." He reached for his already cooled tea, and noticed that the yellow mug had a smiley with fangs painted on it. He closed his hand around it and emptied it in one go.

"You will have to tell them eventually," Seishiro said matter-of-factly, laying his hand with the harmless-looking scars onto the table. "The marks won't go away and I don't intend to die any time soon to find out what the Dao does then."

"I know." Subaru sighed. "But right now—" He shook his head. "I have to get the marks under control first."

"You might not get that much time. Even under the best circumstances mark training can take years — if you are gifted."

"Then we had better stop wasting time." Subaru straightened. "What do I have to do?"

"First, learn to tell apart what's you and what's me coming through the marks."

"I do that already."

Seishiro shook his head. "You do it by content; you fail the moment my sensations are similar to yours. Body sensation and mark sensations can be distinguished separately."

At last, something to work with. "Show me."

Seishiro indicated his still untouched dish. "After you've eaten something."

The place seemed to be infinite, endless black marble floor stretching to the horizon on all sides, now hidden by a wavering field of fog obscuring anything beneath shoulder height. No wind carrying sakura petals across his line of sight, no dramatic flap of a coattail — this was a pragmatic scenery that had nothing of the elaborate effects Subaru had come to expect in Seishiro's maboroshi.

The wind sickle suddenly rose above the fog, hissed past his left ear, close enough to ruffle his hair. "Concentrate!" Seishiro ordered as it dived back into the fog. "Whose hand is bleeding? Yours or mine?"

The marks tingled with pain from afar. "Yours."

"See yourself," Seishiro ordered, dispelling the maboroshi's fog.

Subaru, numbly, saw the drops of blood on the ground next to his left foot. "But... your hand is hurting," he protested.

"Because yours hurts." Seishiro shook his head. "You have to distinguish your body, your sensations from mine. Sort the information coming from me from the information about yourself, see both and separate them consciously. Otherwise, you are lost the moment you lose control briefly and I'm not near." The wound, the blood and pain in his palm disappeared. The fog swirled up, enclosing them again. "Again. Your hand or mine?"

The wind sickle hissed through the mist, leaving a band of angry curls in its path. Nothing touched his hands. "Yours."

The fog dropped. Seishiro raised his hands, showed unblemished palms to him. "Neither. Concentrate."

"Why do you practice it like this?" Subaru asked. They had to have been training for hours, but he couldn't be sure. Time perception in a maboroshi might not be reliable.

"The pain is sharp and localized. The body reaction is strong and clearly located, and therefore easier to determine." Seishiro smiled. "If you want to try something difficult: ever tried to pinpoint an itch?"

"Did you learn it this way?"

"It's the most basic exercise."

"How old were you?"

"Four. Five." Seishiro shrugged. The fog swirled up again; the wind sickle circled them. "Whose hand?"

A sharp pain ran over Subaru's palm. "Mine."

Seishiro sighed, raising his bloodied hand over the fog before dispelling it with a wave that left an arch of crimson pearls on the dark ground. "We'll stop for today. You're too tired; there's no point continuing."

Subaru's feet sunk into the thick black carpet of Seishiro's living room. It was dark outside and they had started after midday. Wearily, he headed towards the couch. If he didn't get some rest—

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To bed."

"You need to eat first," Seishiro insisted sternly. "We're not working with training spells here, but with real marks. You'll need your strength when you make a mistake with them. And the bed's over there." He nodded at the open bedroom door behind him.

"I don't intend to pay you today," Subaru returned dryly.

"Feel your marks." Seishiro showed one of his hands to him. In the dimness of the unlit room, the pentacle on its back glowed a pale red. "How long do you think it will take till you are forced to come to my bed? Thirty minutes? An hour? Do the two of us a favor and stop squirming. It's been a long day."

It had been a strange feeling to go to bed beside someone; more so with that someone being Seishiro. Seishiro who'd leaned comfortably against the pillow-cushioned headboard, reading an unmarked document folder by the light of the bedside lamp. Subaru had watched him cautiously, had seen the lamp reflexes wander over the cognac tinged glasses as Seishiro followed the lines of text.

A glass of water and a carafe stood on the bedside table. A notepad with a pen clipped to it lay on the cover on Seishiro's lap. The top page was half covered in cryptic scribbles. At some point, Seishiro had frowned, flipped back a couple of pages and checked something, written another line on the pad and resumed reading.

The room had been quiet, except for their breathing, the occasional scratch of the ballpoint pen on the paper, and the rustle when Seishiro turned a page. Half asleep, Subaru had seen how Seishiro tiredly pinched the bridge of his nose beneath his glasses and stifled a yawn before gathering himself up and continuing to work.

Subaru had tried to catch a glimpse of the real condition of Seishiro's hands beneath the illusion, but at some time he'd dozed off. By the time the electronic beeping of the alarm clock had registered with him in the morning, Seishiro had already been awake and about to get up.

Later that day, they went to get his toothbrush and fresh clothes from his place. Subaru had wanted to go alone, but the marks were still too raw for that. Seishiro hadn't said a word about it, had merely taken his coat from the wardrobe and opened the door for him.

Subaru hated it; hated the weakness, the dependency, everything — especially that Seishiro knew it and made it easy for him. Subaru knew he should be glad about that; he wasn't.

They returned not only with his essentials but also with a stack of faxes; cases he was unwilling to cancel. The thirty minutes on the train back were spent in whispered argument about the balance between mark exercises, work, and overall daily life. Seishiro had a schedule of his own and refused to work with him on more than two cases a day.

Subaru spent the rest of the day on the phone, renegotiating appointments, suggesting alternative help, and therefore rigorously thinning his schedule.

Still, he failed to keep up in the following weeks.

Some of the mark exercises took up whole days; longer when the backlash was too strong to recover from it in a single day. Those were the times when he didn't always know how he'd got into bed the night before.

Consequently, there were further inquiries about his well-being, and their tone became stricter and more impatient; but the number of files actually sent his way decreased.

"They're outsourcing the easy jobs," Seishiro commented with a grin. "Took them long enough."

Subaru, sitting at the breakfast table and going through one of the most terse case summaries he'd ever seen, didn't bother with a reply. His headaches were murderous and his grandmother would kill him...

...if working with Seishiro didn't kill him first.

Minami-Aoyama-cho, Tokyo

March 16, 2000 – 11:38

"I think it's here..." Subaru looked up the pale green five-storey apartment complex and checked the address on the fax sheet again. The narrow front garden, not much more than a line of low bushes along the foot of the house, showed early yellow flowers scattered among the fresh green leaves. A small tree, still supported by a tripod, was planted next to the entrance. The white double door with the glass inserts looked new, too — likely repairs necessary after last year's destruction.

"It is, if your client didn't move house since you got the file," Seishiro said dryly, already heading up the three steps and checking the bell board. "Here, Miozuki Aiko, apartment 2-3." He pressed the button impatiently.

Subaru hurried up the stairs when the interphone buzzed. =Miozuki. Who's there?=  
=

"Sumeragi Subaru and associate," Seishiro answered before Subaru reached him. "You called for us."

"Yes. Oh, I'm so glad you could make it. Please, do come in."

The door buzzed and Seishiro pushed against it. He snickered as he held it open for Subaru. "Count Dracula would love her. So easy to be invited in." He looked up the staircase. "Second floor and no lift." He sighed, putting his hand on the rail. "Let's go."

Subaru hurried to overtake him on the stairs.

"Please, Miozuki-san, be so kind as to describe the events that led you to contact the Sumeragi."

"I already explained in detail on my initial call. Surely—"

Subaru nodded. "You did. But I'd like to hear it in your own words instead of relying solely on the case file." He didn't add that his grandmother's case fax had been sorely lacking details, implying that he should call her — something he hadn't done for various reasons. One of these was currently sitting next to him on Miozuki's living room couch, sipping tea while listening attentively to what the old lady had to tell them about the sound of steps in the night and the sudden inexplicable translocation of objects. She'd contacted the Sumeragi when small items began to move towards her, dropping to the floor right in front or behind her, one — a pepper mill — almost hitting her head.

"Poltergeist?" Seishiro made it a question.

"Yes." Subaru nodded. "And it's getting bolder." He looked at Miozuki again. "Were there any unfortunate events in this apartment?"

"None that I know of," the old lady replied. "And I've been living here since my husband passed away in 1975."

Seishiro put his cup down. "Maybe he holds a grudge against you."

"Of course not!" Miozuki protested.

"We apologize, Miozuki-san," Subaru said, covertly kicking the back of Seishiro's leg. "But it is a valid question. Spirits often have an understanding of our world which they lacked when they were alive." He stood, not without shooting a warning glare at Seishiro who, unperturbed, refilled his teacup. "I will try to locate the source of the phenomenon. Miozuki-san, once I established the banning field, do not cross into it for any reason. It would be dangerous." He went a few steps away from them and took an ofuda from his pocket. Focusing on his raised fingertips, he called on his power.

°°°Om.°°°

Even at that very first syllable of the mantra he felt the marks tugging at him, reminding him of his incompleteness. He smelled tea on his tongue and wished Seishiro would stop sipping from his cup.

°°°Om Abokya Beiroshanau Makabodara.°°°<sup>14</sup>

The magical energy he'd raised flowed calmly around him. There was a faint ripple from the couch — Miozuki's stern disapproval of his 'apprentice' registered, but that was neither strong enough nor old enough to be the source of the Poltergeist. Subaru exhaled quietly.

°°°Mani Handomajinpara Haraparitaya Un.°°°

He straightened and folded the prepared ofuda back into his pocket. There was nothing here.

"I was told Sumeragi-sama would be working alone," he heard Miozuki saying in a low voice.

"He is working alone. I'm merely the driver," Seishiro returned idly.

"Then why aren't you waiting outside with the car?"

"That wouldn't do since I'm learning the art." Seishiro beamed at her. "I'm just jobbing as a driver to finance my education."

"Forgive my intrusion... but aren't you a tad old to be still an apprentice?"

Seishiro pouted and put his tea down.

"His gift was discovered rather late," Subaru stated calmly. The banning field was gone. "That's also why I work with him personally. After all, we wouldn't want Seishiro-kun to make a mistake, would we?" He threw a warning glance at his 'driver'. "He could end up becoming the Sakurazukamori's prey otherwise." To Miozuki he added, "The source is not within this apartment. It most likely stems from one of the neighboring flats or comes from someone closely connected to this place who you don't know about. We will have to inquire with your neighbors if we are to pursue the apparition." He bowed at the old lady. "I understand that you'd prefer to keep this private. But I'm worried about the increasing level of violence in its actions."

Miozuki looked unhappily at them. "How bad could it become?"

"Lethal," Seishiro said dryly.

"It will be best if you wait outside while we make the necessary preparations," Subaru bowed again. "Your presence might interfere with the summoning."

"Summoning?" Seishiro asked once he'd closed the apartment door behind Miozuki.

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14 "Om Abokya..." taken from Tokyo Babylon vol. 0: T-Y-O

"Nonsense!" Subaru glared at him. "Stop expanding our tale. One of my clients may mention something of it to grandmother and—"

"Why should they?" Seishiro shrugged. "The jobs get done, don't they?"

"To express their gratitude," Subaru snapped, annoyed. "But I suspect that's nothing that happens in your work."

"It is exceedingly rare, I admit," Seishiro smirked, hands in his pant pockets. "So, whom are you going to summon?"

*Enma Daio's secretary, to read you the riot act!* "Nobody. I'm going to set a shikigami on the ghost's trail and then we go and question the neighbors. *Politely*. Please keep in mind that my clients *can* talk outside a séance afterwards."

"Yes, I've come to consider that one of the downsides of your work."

°°°Shuku Do.°°° The white ofuda on his hand began to glow and curled up at the edges. Subaru flattened his palm and added the last syllable. °°°Sho.°°°

In a whirl of wind and fluttering wings, his shikigami rose into the air, circling the room briefly. "There's a spiritual trail in this room—"

The shikigami hovered in the air in front of Seishiro, flapping its wings agitatedly.

"This is getting ridiculous..." Subaru muttered. "Not him," he corrected the helper spirit. "The other one!"

The white dove circled again, then dived through the apartment door.

Outside, they saw it circle in front of the door opposite Miozuki's apartment before it passed through the hallway window to disappear between the buildings.

"External source," Seishiro commented.

"And we will find out what it wants here," Subaru said. "Miozuki-san," he addressed the old lady waiting outside, "please be so kind as to introduce us to your neighbors now."

The questioning of the neighbors on the floor above and below them didn't yield much. Three of the four parties were still working and he had to use Miozuki's phone list to call them. There had been this or that odd event recently, but they mostly wrote it off as tiredness or their children playing a joke on them. Nothing had transpired in the apartments on the fourth floor or at street level, so Subaru decided against inquiring at adjacent houses. The reason for the Poltergeist's manifestation had to be in this house, on this or the next floor.

He closed his eyes, checked on his shikigami, but the white dove was still hurrying west, curving and diving around several highrises and across a field of rubble where a tall structure had collapsed. A large billboard indicated that reconstruction of Shibuya 109 was about to begin.

"The source is farther away than I thought," Subaru told Seishiro quietly. "It's currently in Shibuya, still heading west. The Poltergeist has to have a strong incentive for being here."

"Who's living over there?" Seishiro asked, pointing at the other door on the floor.

"That's the apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Shimizawa. They were caught in the earthquake down in Shibuya last autumn."

Shibuya. Seishiro's eyes narrowed, focusing on the door.

"Don't—" Subaru started to say, then realized it would be in vain. Seishiro was already testing the doorknob. "Miozuki-san," Subaru hurried to call their client's attention back to him. *Please, don't kick in that door!* he thought desperately at Seishiro's muttered 'Inconvenient'. "Has the place been retenanted since then?"

"No, these are owned flats and Mrs. Shimizawa is still alive," Miozuki explained. "But her husband died." Behind her, Seishiro drew a pentagram around the doorknob. "It's really tragic. They were such a nice couple—"

"And rather negligent." Seishiro had pushed open the door. "Leaving their place unlocked in times as unsafe as these!"

"Miozuki-san, please stay outside," Subaru quickly stepped between their client and the door. "We don't know what to expect."

"You should bring restraints for nosy customers," Seishiro hissed as they entered the flat.

"Why? I've got you to entertain them with breaking into their neighbor's flat," Subaru retaliated under his breath.

"Breaking in? Really, Subaru-kun," Seishiro chided equally quietly. "I usually work with more style!"

The apartment was dark and dingy, with shuttered windows and withered plants. The light from the corridor outside fell in a rectangular frame onto a grey floor. Dust had been whirled up. Subaru blinked, and the image of a hospital room laid itself over the scene. "The shikigami has found the source," he said quietly. "A woman. Comatose." He concentrated, whispered an order to the spirit bird. A moment later, he released it. "Naito Hospital, Hatsudai-cho."

Somewhere inside something hit the floor with a loud thump. Seishiro moved slowly into the dark hallway to the right. Subaru felt for the light switch next to the door and bathed the devastated apartment into yellow lamp light. Trails from one room to the next were running through the dust on the floor. Subaru turned left. If the layout was similar to Miozuki's place, then the kitchen had to be on the right, with the bathroom next to it. The sleeping quarters—

A door banged open at his side. Subaru turned just in time to catch the shadow leaping at him before grimy fingernails could reach his face.

"No!" he yelled at Seishiro, who appeared behind the frail, struggling assailant in Subaru's secure grip, ready to strike. "No. I've got him."

"Indeed." Seishiro wrinkled his nose.

The man in his grip had ceased to struggle and was now cowering from the bright light. Tattered clothes and matted hair did little to hide a face deadly white from lack of sunlight and an abundance of fear. Subaru tried to breathe shallow. The inhabitant shared the dingy smell of the unkept apartment.

"Is that... the ghost?" Miozuki asked curiously from the door.

"Hardly," Seishiro commented wryly. "It's too lively for a ghost."

"Miozuki-san," Subaru intervened calmly. "Please be so kind as to call the social services. Tell them we've got an abandoned hikikomori who needs their help urgently."<sup>15</sup>

"*That*," Seishiro nodded at the shivering heap of unwashed human in Subaru's arm once Miozuki had hurried next door, "can't be the source of our Poltergeist."

"No," Subaru agreed. "But he's most likely the reason for it. I think that the woman in Shibuya is Mrs. Shimizawa and this is her son. I'll inquire at the hospital once the social services have sent someone to take care of him."

"You don't trust me with him?" Seishiro asked, a mock expression of pain on his face.

"No," Subaru returned. "Would you?"

~::~::~~

Kioi-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo

Hotel New Otani

49 minutes later

Seishiro rested his chin comfortably in his palm and looked, seemingly idle, at the garden outside. He'd barely found time to change clothes in Minato — the Carte d'Argent required formal attire in which he couldn't possibly pass as Subaru's driver — and arrived twenty minutes before his "appointment". The restaurant, renowned for its exquisite French cuisine, lay on the first floor. Its wide front of panorama windows provided an excellent view of the garden Lord Kato had created in the sixteenth century. He wondered briefly, what the samurai of old would have done had he known that at the end of the twentieth century his beloved garden, meticulously preserved until the present day, was the outdoor attraction of the New Otani hotel complex, tastefully illuminated and gawked at daily by thousands of visitors.

Of course, Seishiro was more interested in the window pane than in the garden beyond; more precisely, in the reflection of the table set behind him in a more remote spot of the restaurant. Either Sawada's secretary hadn't been precise when making the reservation that had called the Mori's attention, or Sawada himself was paranoid regarding sharp shooters. Seishiro smirked behind his hand. Admittedly, Sawada had some reason to fear shooters. According to the briefing file, it wouldn't be the first attempt on his life in a public place.

The waiter approached Seishiro's table to take his order. After a brief glance at the menu, he ordered ducklings in saffron.

At the other table, Sawada was speaking intently to his guests, feeling secure in the acoustics of the room which were designed to keep conversations private. Seishiro leaned back comfortably. An unobtrusive spell had taken care of that feature twenty minutes ago. So far, the discussion held little of interest; most of it dealt with a joint venture involving some company in Singapore.

Seishiro's meal arrived, smelling delicious. He'd always liked saffron; even more than its taste and the texture of its stigmata on his tongue, he enjoyed the knowledge that it was highly toxic. It was a rather expensive death. And freely available in every deli if one had the necessary money.

He savored the taste and listened to Sawada discussing financial details over a dish of what looked like spiny lobster in red wine. He stifled a yawn. The man should be killed for being such a bore in the first place. But so far, nothing had transpired that validated him as a target. Nothing. But...

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<sup>15</sup> Hikikomori (lit. "pulling away, being confined,") are reclusive adolescents and young adults who have chosen to withdraw from social life, often seeking extreme degrees of isolation and confinement.

One of the diplomats, laughing, pulled out his briefcase, causing no less than three bodyguards scattered across the restaurant to tense. He showed a picture to Sawada, indicating something on it.

Cold flowed over Seishiro's spine. He straightened. There it was. The power was indeed remarkable, but unfocused; *very unfocused*.

*Unacknowledged or unrealized*, Seishiro concluded, watching in the reflection how Sawada returned the gesture. The chill abated when the discussion returned to business topics.

Seishiro signaled the waiter for an ashtray and lit a cigarette, unobtrusively using first the flame of the lighter and then the glow of the cigarette's tip as a focus. But the surge of power was gone. He pulled a deep drag and tried again, but the brightly glowing tobacco also failed to reveal what had just been there. He slowly tapped the ash off his cigarette and leaned back again. There was something powerful, dangerous even, but Sawada wasn't the source of it...

...a relay. Sawada himself didn't pose a threat, but somebody closely related to him did — and went off the scale with it, so that he still registered powerfully. Possible that it was even strong enough to accidentally help Sawada along. That was why Romiro's results had been inconclusive despite his prolonged investigation. He was commissioned to kill Sawada, but Sawada wasn't the main threat. Seishiro took a final drag. The client wouldn't like that. He stubbed the cigarette out and signaled the waiter to bring the bill.

He left the hotel through the main entrance twenty minutes later. Outside the street lamps had lit up. The wind caught his coat, batted it to the side. He tied his belt firmly and stuffed his hands into the pockets against the chill. Heading south, along the Shimizudani park towards the Nagatacho metro station, he contemplated his next move. He had to observe Sawada's surroundings. The man was the link, but the target, though connected, didn't seem to keep close contact, otherwise Romiro would have come across it. So...

Seishiro's steps slowed slightly as he headed down the steps to the station. The briefing file mentioned a son, living apart from his father...

~::~::~~

Kabuki-cho

Subaru stepped out of the shower and wrapped the towel around him. He felt sorrow for Mrs. Shimizawa who, trapped in a body not allowed to die, had still struggled to support her hikikomori son. Naito-kun looked as if he had withdrawn from society a long time ago, and who knew whether he'd ever manage to reintegrate. At the end of the bet, Subaru hadn't been that different — only his withdrawal had been even more complete. And he knew he would have remained that way if not for his sister.

A casual glance at the cracked bathroom mirror showed a face almost alien to him. Seishiro's insistence on three meals a day "or facing the consequences", whatever that meant — actually, Subaru was tempted to skip some and find out — together with regular sleep in the last six weeks had brought that about. Cautiously, he touched his cheek with his fingertips. The bruise was merely a blue shade along his cheek bone and he hoped that Miozuki-san had overlooked it.

Subaru slung the towel tighter around himself and went to get dressed.

There was a reason why Seishiro still accompanied him on his jobs, despite the fact that Subaru was now quite good at sorting his own sensations from those coming from the marks. Maintaining control was considerably more difficult when he was using his art; as an integral part of his magic the marks would always react then.

He pulled up his pants and took the last clean sweater out of the closet.

At least that was how Seishiro had explained it, and the explanation made sense. Unfortunately, there was a difference between understanding something and being able to use it. The harsh training with the wind sickle had taught him within three days how to tell Seishiro's sensations precisely from his own — and he'd got the impression that he'd really surprised Seishiro with learning it in that short a time — but forcing Seishiro's sensations back when they threatened him meant bringing his spiritual shield to bear against his own magic — and that was another matter altogether. When he'd finally managed it, he'd also blocked himself from reaching out, magically blinding himself.

He rolled the sleeves down onto his wrists and tugged the turtleneck into place.

The sudden, inescapable emptiness of the world around him had been the most terrifying experience in his life. He'd almost wept with relief when Seishiro brought him out of it with a sound slap to his face.

The neon ads on the adjacent buildings came on as Subaru stuffed his dirty clothes in a laundry bag. He would have to leave soon. Sakuragi was practically on the opposite site of Shinjuku on the Yamanote line, giving a commuting time of slightly above thirty minutes — and that didn't include the way from the station to Seishiro's house, another fifteen minutes.

Four days had passed since he'd last managed to visit. He really ought to redirect his fax number to a mailbox; cases could be on rather short notice after all. At least a dozen new pages lay on the tray of his fax machine. He sighed and scanned them briefly. Six new jobs, one at the Diet Building. He had no idea how he was going to explain Seishiro's company there—

His daily observances to the family's kami were another issue. He couldn't possibly bring the kamidana into Seishiro's house, and coming daily to Kabuki-cho was out of the question...

...but then he lived with Death, so he probably should stop worrying about it anyway. He probably served the kami better by *not* coming near them in his perpetually impure state. He'd been marked by Death before, but now *he* had marked Death. Were marks dark or light magic? They had drawn blood when they were placed; they injured the one bearing them — all signs of dark magic. But the power within the marks was his own and he hadn't set them of his own free will; the Dao had done that for him. Did that count?

He ran his hand through his hair, pushing the wet strands out of his face. These were questions Seishiro was no help with, and they still worried him. And then there was still Kamui. Guiltily, Subaru realized it had been weeks since he'd thought of the boy. That, at least, was a call he could make on the spot.

The phone was answered after the second ring.

"Imonoyama-san. This is Sumeragi Subaru. May I speak with Kamui, please?"

=I'm sorry, but Kamui and Mono left the campus shortly after you returned to Shinjuku. I've got no information about their current whereabouts.=

Subaru's hand tightened around the receiver at the news. "How was he doing? Was he alright?"

=As can be expected, given the circumstances,= Imonoyama replied. =The Twin Star has his moments. I think that's why they left. Kamui didn't want to endanger the people here.= There was a brief pause from Imonoyama's end of the line, then: =There were several inquiries from your clan regarding your location.=

Subaru drew a sharp breath. "I'm... staying with a mutual friend."

=I see.= Again there was only the buzz of the line for a few moments, then Imonoyama said, =I told them I didn't know. As far as I'm concerned, I still don't know.= Mischief sounded in his voice when he added. =After all, he has several rooms and I can't possibly know in which one you're staying.=



## Interregnum 2

CLAMP Campus, Tokyo  
Imonoyama Mansion  
March 16, 2000 — 20:11

Imonoyama Nokoru hung up the phone and sat back in his seat just when Suoh, leaning heavily on his hated walking stick, limped into the room. Nokoru folded his hands in front of his belly, knowing that he was grinning like the proverbial Cheshire Cat.

"You look like you ate the canary again, Kaicho," Suoh remarked, slowly making his way toward the desk.

"How's the wound doing?" Nokoru asked, allowing his concern to show in his voice, while Suoh eased himself into one of the upholstered chairs.

"It's healing. *Slowly*." The last word sounded offended. "And Akechi says that if I start exercising before he says so, he'll shoot me up with curare to keep me down." Suoh sighed. "You know, your physician gives me the creeps."

"Because he'd do it," Nokoru replied dryly. "So you had better obey him."

"Rest assured," Suoh snorted. "And you didn't distract me. I *know* that look on your face, Kaicho! That's the one you have when one of your matchmaking projects has worked out. So who's the poor sod this time?"

Nokoru laughed out loud. "You wouldn't believe me even if I told you."

~::~::~~

In another building on the far side of the vast campus area, Kakyo sat on a chair he'd laboriously pulled over to the window. Resting with his still trembling arms folded on the windowsill, he looked out across the campus, the dark waters of the harbor beyond, and the colorful lights of Odaiba in the distance. The window was open. The sea wind ruffled the short pale strands on his head as he leaned forward to bring the brightly lit band of the Ariake docks into his view. He ran an unsteady hand through his hair. At least, it no longer felt like fur. He shivered in the breeze and rested his chin on his arms. A pigeon sat on the other side of the safety net, batting its wings for balance on the narrow ledge...

...feathers, edged in blood, drifted across Tokyo.

The moon, a single eye hanging in the night sky, bathed the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven in its cold white light. Moonlight that made the blood running down the boy's unsteady legs look black...

~::~::~~

Edogawa-ku, Tokyo  
Shinozaki High School  
March 17, 2000 — 08:15

Black, parallel shadows fell across the school yard, slicing the concrete field into thin stripes of light and dark. The sprawling four-storey complex of the Shinozaki High School lay forbidding behind its high steel fence. The still-low morning sun glittered off the polished steel palisades. Edogawa hadn't suffered nearly as much as downtown Tokyo, but the events of last year had tightened security even here. The four-fold school bell sounded just as Kamui, panting, reached the corner to see the large school gate closing with a loud, terminal clang. The teacher on gate watch checked the lock, tucked his clipboard under his arm and shooed the last lingering pupils inside to get to his own class. The double doors swung briefly, then the yard was deserted.

Kamui cursed. He'd run all the way from the shrine; the bandaged burns on his arms throbbed with his pulse, and he was too late. Again.

*No!* He threw a cautious glance left and right down the street, then tossed his brown leather satchel over the fence and leaped smoothly over the high palisades, landing hard on the other side. He grabbed his scratched bag from the concrete and ran for the side entrance.

The attendance register was already being read when he slipped through the classroom door and onto his seat.

"Ookawa?"

"Here."

"Shiro?"

"Here," Kamui answered.

"I see that Mr. Shiro decided to join us today," the teacher commented, looking sternly over the rim of his spectacles. "A welcome surprise. — Suronamida?"

A few moments later, when the teacher told them to open their textbooks on page 748, Kamui found out that Fuma's bento hadn't survived the fence-tossing. The carefully tied lid had come loose and now the thick book on old Japanese literature held at least as much nutrient as content. Suronamida at the next table snickered. Kamui glared at him.

"Shiro! Pay attention! I asked you to open the book on page 748," the teacher scolded. "Why don't you open your book?"

"I'm sorry. I— My bento leaked onto it."

The class burst into laughter. The teacher shook his head, annoyed. "Move over to Suronamida; he'll share his book with you. Let's continue with our work on the Genji Monogatari..."

Friday afternoon was reserved for clubs. The activities on offer ranged from various sports to traditional arts, gardening and computing and attending more than the mandatory two was encouraged.

Kamui skipped clubs altogether. Since he'd "returned" to school in the middle of the last trimester, he hadn't bothered to join any for the few remaining weeks. On Monday, the official exam result lists would be put on display. Kamui knew that he had to repeat the year. He didn't even have all the necessary exams, and the two he'd written since returning to Edogawa had been... well, forming a kekkai around them was probably a good idea. In the tests with one hundred possible points, his scores were close to the one-digit range. He would have stayed at home these last few days before the spring holiday, but after last year he had way too much out-of-school-time on his record. The stigma of being a slacker, a repeater and would-be-freeter<sup>16</sup> stuck already, and it wasn't making his daily life easier. And Fuma—

Kamui walked faster.

The unlit hallway in the Mono house still seemed to be reeking of blood. They'd spent weeks scrubbing and painting it, but no amount of soap, disinfectant and wall paint could erase the memory. Kamui wearily pushed his hair back out of his face, wincing when the bandages around his arm tightened at the movement, and dropped his soiled schoolbag in a corner.

Somewhere in the mess inside it was a teacher's note for "his guardian" about his abysmal scores and lack of attendance. His guardian...

The kannushi of Togakushi Shrine was his guardian. But when his mother had signed that document, the position was held by Mono Kyogo, Fuma's father, not Fuma himself. Not the Twin St—

Fuma.

When Fuma was Fuma, he made him bento, looked after his homework, urged him to study...

When he was the Twin Star, he tried to detonate the central-heating boiler of Kamui's school. If Suronamida hadn't gloated at Kamui that day, telling him he was finally getting what he deserved for his truancy because his guardian only came to school to—

Kamui had found the Twin Star at the last possible moment, moving around the boiler room blocking the final safety valves with broad clamps. By the time he'd squeezed himself through the window to confront the Twin Star, to help Fuma fight his way back, the pressure gauge of the boiler had already been deep in the red, the room filled with the hisses of overstrained valves and the bleeping of alarms and the janitor's pounding on the door blocked by a broomstick.

He'd thrown himself against the Twin Star, knocking him off his feet, and the valve next to them had burst, scalding steam hitting his left arm and almost burning the sleeve of his school uniform into his skin.

They'd barely escaped the janitor by climbing out the same window, Kamui had used to get in. At first, Kamui's arm had been numb, but then...

Later at home, Fuma had been so contrite when he carefully peeled the fabric off Kamui's arm and applied cooling gel and salve. Fuma.

Where was Fuma? Or was he—?

Kamui started to run, burst through the kitchen door, then through the back door... to find Fuma in the white shirt and pale blue hakama, sweeping the shrine's compound. Fuma. Not the Twin Star.

For now.

~::~::~::~~

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<sup>16</sup> Freeter. People between the ages of 15 and 34 who lack full time employment or are unemployed, excluding housewives and students. Young people who deliberately choose not to work or cannot find employment due to a lack of marketable skills.

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
March 17, 2000 — 16:37

The Sumeragi Estate held several smaller buildings in addition to the main house. One, a delicate but spiritually heavily protected structure guarding the driveway up to the house, also contained a small office. Its walls were lined with protective ofuda and magical markings encircled the low lacquer desk and specifically the telephone on it.

"Sumeragi Estate, public relations office. How may we help you?"

Sumeragi Yimura answered the phone immediately and listened attentively, her pen poised at the ready above a notepad of pristinely white paper. Upon her return from school, she'd actually suggested that they get a computer for managing the cases and the schedules, but the twelfth head would have none of it. Yimura, with her negligible magical talent and the ink on her diploma not yet dried, hadn't been able to say anything, though she still believed that a computer like the ones they'd had at school would make her job easier and reduce the risk of accidentally double-booking someone. Ah well...

She returned her attention to the long-winded expressions of gratitude coming from the former client she had on the line.

=...and please assure Sumeragi-sama that I'd never have insisted on such a quick appointment had I known of his recent injury and—=

"What!?" Yimura leaped to her feet. "Sumeragi-sama has been inj—" She clamped her mouth shut and said in a sweet voice. "I'm sorry, Miozuki-san. There seems to be a glitch in the line. Please be so kind as to repeat your last line."

Yimura's pen flew over the paper as she noted every word the client told her about "the ugly bruise" and "that annoying apprentice" to whom — in hindsight — Miozuki thought she should have been nicer, given the circumstances. Yimura extricated herself skillfully from the call and hung up. She was already sprinting across the yard when she heard the phone ringing again. She ignored it.

## 06 — April Shower (a.k.a. S-M-S)

*...Heat and Obsession...*

*...Power and Play...*

*...Control and Lust...*

*It had found lust the most intriguing: so very different from any of its experiences as a cherry tree, and so contrary in itself. Men spent so much of their strength and effort on it — just to fade in the afterglow. The concept didn't make sense, until it learned from Yue that it was about seeding. And desire. And — most of all — power.*

*The Tree's branches quivered, releasing a torrent of crimson-lined petals into the ever dark maboroshi night. Power was a concept it understood.*

*Power. And Play.*

Ueno Park, Tokyo

March 28, 2000

The yellow warning tape crackled in the fresh breeze that chased the spring clouds out of the sky. The morning sun glittered on the white lacquered metal sign bearing the official symbol of the Tokyo Garden and Park Department above a warning: Disinfestation in progress — Do not pass. Seishiro planted it firmly in the dark soil and allowed himself a smile.

The annual disinfestation of the notorious species 'hanami enthusiast'.

Though in the year of his entrance exams to university, when the cherries had blossomed exceptionally early, Seishiro had learned the hard way that the only way to keep the Tree out of mischief in a park clogged with people was to sit under it day and night.

Two-thousand-six-hundred-and-something years old, and it didn't know better than to snack on two drunken salarymen sleeping it off on its roots. Not the wisest choice of diet for an entity sensitive to alcohol but immune to aspirin, and possessing the metabolic speed of any ordinary tree. Seishiro sighed and settled comfortably against the trunk for a brief rest before a very busy day. A twig brushed the skin under his ear.

*...stop nagging me...* the Tree whispered with myriads of blossoms moving in the spirit wind. *...It wasn't that big a deal...*

"Three weeks." Seishiro reached up and ran his hand leisurely through the thick tuft of flowers. "Three weeks of hangover aren't negligible."

*...You're petty...* the Tree complained, brushing the cushioned twig along his jaw while another wound slowly around his waist. And stopped. *...You've lost weight...* the Tree scolded earnestly. *...You must look after yourself...*

"Can't be helped," Seishiro sighed. "Two jobs at once and a new pet will do that to you."

The Tree tipped his head back, forced him to look up into its glowing, ever-moving crown while countless petals rained down around him.

*...He isn't a pet to you anymore, and you know it...*

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

09:17

Breakfast was a quiet affair with Seishiro already gone. Subaru had another sip of his tea, then put the cup aside and read through the fax again. Its paper had a tea stain and one of its corners was soaked in milk that had spilled over from his cereal, the result of Yoshi unexpectedly venturing across the table onto his current place: Subaru's lap.

The case description was precise and surprisingly detailed. Instead of an appointment date, a contact phone number was given. Apparently, where the government was concerned, the main house considered it wiser to let him make his own appointments than to run the risk that he'd cancel theirs.

There had been several sightings. The descriptions by numerous witnesses indicated apparitions that looked similar but differed in size and behavior, ranging from the height of a Barbie doll to that of a human being, from silent tears to maniacal laughter. The sites where the apparition had been spotted were scattered

unusually wide, covering the National Diet Building, its side wings holding the House of Councilors and the House of Representatives, and even the Diet Library on the other side of a busy street.

Absentmindedly, Subaru ran his fingers through Yoshi's fur, which was no longer scruffy and torn since he'd begun to fetch the paper in the morning, secretly letting the cat in. A faint, contented purring arose, reverberating through him, and for a few breaths he just sat there, enjoying the quiet peace, before he determinedly pushed the resistant Yoshi off his lap and went to call the Diet secretary for a first inspection of the site.

Subaru left the house twenty minutes later with a wriggling Yoshi in his arms. He hadn't felt comfortable leaving the cat on its own. Locking the door behind him, he threw a brief look across the small lane beyond the garden gate. There were only two houses here: Seishiro's, and Yoshino's next to it at the corner. On the other side, the Yanaka cemetery stretched down to the street, hidden behind a high, rough-stoned wall. Now, at the end of March, greenery sprouted at the wall's foot and crown, giving the place a rustic, almost idyllic touch.

So unlike anything he'd always associated with Seishiro, with the Sakurazukamori. On the other hand... the lane had clearly at some time been a side entrance to the cemetery. Once past Seishiro's house it turned into a narrow, seldom-used dirt path, skirting the wall of Seishiro's garden after running through a rusted gate hidden under old trees and tall shrubs. A birch had wound itself through the corroded bars, holding it open for eternity, and the massive trunks and branches of the sakura lining the cemetery paths beyond were full of thick, plump buds, ready to burst into flower. So maybe it wasn't that odd...

Holding an unhappy Yoshi closer, Subaru crossed Seishiro's plain, almost bare garden, closed the gate with his foot, and headed towards the street corner.

Unlike Seishiro's, Yoshino's gate always stood open. Tidily pruned beds of spring flowers lined the white-stone path to the house door. A round ceramic fortune cat, looking suspiciously like Yoshi wearing a kappogi, raised its paw on the small terrace in front of it.

Subaru climbed the three steps that led up to the door and tried to ring without dropping the squirming cat.

"Can I help you?"

Subaru turned and saw a small, elderly woman in gardening clothes looking across a hedge at him. "Maybe; I'm looking for Yoshino-san."

"Then you've found her." She left her thick gardening gloves on the stones and came over to him. "You're the one living with Sakurazuka-sensei, aren't you?"

"Yes; my name's Sumeragi." He stepped down from the terrace. "I've got to leave early today and I didn't want to lock Yoshi in."

"Thank you for bringing him." She took the big cat out of his arms with practiced ease and casually stroked it under the chin, provoking a loud purring. "I'm glad that Yoshi didn't inconvenience you or the sensei. Few people are as accommodating as Sakurazuka-sensei with a nosy kitten practically moving into their house."

Subaru nodded and turned to leave.

"By the way, would it be convenient for you to take his mail, please? He's got quite a few letters today and I'll be off visiting my sister later."

Subaru stopped, turning back. "Of course I can take his mail."

"Thank you." She sat Yoshi down and went inside. A few moments later, she reappeared with a stack of eight or nine letters.

"Do you always collect his mail?" Subaru asked, surprised.

"Yes, it's easier for the mailman and the sensei tends to work late."

*So that's why Yoshi hasn't suffered from sakanagi yet. You're—* Subaru almost dropped the letters when he felt the spell spilling over his hands. He drew the protective symbol almost in reflex, scattering the tracer before it could embed itself. A tracer spell on Seishiro's mail...

"Is something the matter?" Yoshino asked, concerned. "Don't you feel well?"

"All's fine, Yoshino-san. Please, don't worry," Subaru reassured her quickly. *But I have to worry... and Seishiro, too.*

Nagata-cho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
National Diet Library  
4th floor

It was well into the afternoon when Subaru, guided by deputy minister Ishido, crossed the large entrance lobby of the National Diet Library and took the lift to the upper floors. He was worried. There was an unusually large number of spiritual signatures scattered all over the place, all too weak for proper

identification; he'd found dozens apart from the spots where the apparition had been sighted. The area itself felt strange, too, ringing with spiritual energy that had nothing to do with apparitions. The last time he'd been here had been the night before the fight on Rainbow Bridge. Now the revitalized kekkai underneath the Diet Building vibrated against him, calling out to one of its sources, stirring up memories he wished to forget. He'd never felt any kekkai that strongly before, except those he'd created himself.

He had probably created this one; at least partially. He wondered if the kekkai around Tokyo called out to Seishiro as well. Or was the Dragon of Earth repelled by them while he was attracted? They were Yin and Yang forming the Dao; equal but opposite sources of it. What was the crux, equality or opposition? And—?

"Sumeragi-san. We have reached the fourth floor." The deputy minister interrupted his thoughts, looking concerned. "Are you well?"

The second one to ask him that today! "I'm fine, thank you. I just feel... the importance of this place weighing on me." Subaru left the elevator and found himself in a sterile looking lobby with a reception desk and two armed guards left and right of it. A sign above the desk read: ~Contemporary Documents. Application form and special clearance required. No camera or pens beyond this point.~

Subaru looked back at the deputy, who flashed his ID at the desk clerk. There was an unlit corridor to the right that somehow drew him in. Several doors went off it left and right; at the end was a window framed with a few green plants and a small set of chairs. Above the last door to the right glowed an emergency exit sign. The place looked unspectacular, except for the armed guards who hurried to block his path when he moved towards it.

"Let him pass. The prime minister is glad to have Sumeragi-san look into the—"

A door further down the corridor opened. "Moshimoto, I need a second notepad and the Hashiba family registry back to 1965 and—" Seishiro stopped in the doorway and looked at them questioningly.

The desk clerk hurried past Subaru. "Excuse us, Sakurazuka-san, may I introduce you to Su—"

"That won't be necessary. We're already acquainted." Seishiro's eyes met Subaru's in silent, amused challenge. "This is quite a surprise, Subaru-kun. It's been a while."

"Yes." *About five hours.* "What are you doing here?"

"I think I should be the one asking that," Seishiro smiled, tapping on the ID card with his photo and the logo of the National Public Safety Commission clipped to his lapel.

"I'm not free to talk about that." Subaru shrugged. "You know what that means." There was no spiritual signature here, except Seishiro's in front of him. He wondered if that was what had drawn him, or if the kekkai calling them had something to do with it as well. The signatures at the other spots had also been vague, indicating either a very weak spirit, or a very focused one who'd had some sort of spiritual training in life. Considering the number of manifestations, he was sure he was dealing with the latter.

Subaru walked past Seishiro to trail his hand over the chairs near the window, making sure that Seishiro's was really the only signature here. He returned slowly.

"There was a tracer on your mail," he said in a low voice on his way back. "You—"

"Let's discuss that in a more private setting." Seishiro indicated the room behind him.

"Sakurazuka-san!" The clerk rushed forward. "That isn't permitted! You're accessing highly sensitive information. You can't possibly—"

"I can't?" Seishiro turned in the doorway, arching a brow at the man.

"Sumeragi-san doesn't have the necessary clearance," the clerk protested sternly, "and—"

"Use mine!" Seishiro closed the door into his face. With a faint click the electronic lock sealed the room. "Moshimoto's such a bore — like these papers."

"I could get in trouble for this," Subaru remarked quietly. "I really—"

Seishiro's fingers traced his jaw. "Don't worry. You'll look properly ravished when leaving. Nobody will believe you'd have had time to study sensitive documents." The golden eyes looked almost grey behind his cognac colored glasses. Grey and—

Subaru's collar button came undone under Seishiro's nimble fingers; Subaru caught the offending hand. "No." He glared at Seishiro. "Neither of us has the time for your games!"

"Not? How disappointing." Laughing faintly, Seishiro shoved aside a disorderly stack of documents covered with ID photos and stamps of +confidential+ and +eyes only+ to half-sit on the edge of the table. "So, what is it?"

"There was a tracer on one of the letters Yoshino-san gave me for you this morning. I dispelled it immediately, but it might have made contact." Noting that Seishiro's mirth was completely gone, Subaru brushed his right thumb over the scars on the back of his hand. "You should probably check your marks."

Seishiro nodded. "Tonight. If it has connected, it's subtle. Something stronger I'd have already noticed. That's nothing I'd address in passing on a pile of files. Speaking of which—" He pushed himself off his perch, running his key card over the scanner to unlock the door. "You had better get going. Or I'll have to do more than ruffle your hair to reassure them."

"Don't you dare—" Subaru began. A firm hand suddenly pressed against the small of his back.

"Wait for me, love," Seishiro, pushing him out the open door, said huskily next to his ear. "I'll be home at eighteen-thirty."

"You—!" Subaru began and found himself in front of a closed door.

"Uhm... Sumeragi-san? May I ask—" Ishido stuttered, clearly uncomfortable.

Subaru ignored him. "There's nothing here. If there are no other buildings where sightings occurred, we're done for today." He took brisk strides towards the lift. "I will plan the exorcism for tomorrow and contact you to set the time."

"But the security—"

"Good day, Ishido-san."

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

It was well into the night, much later than he'd planned, when Seishiro finally closed his door behind him and slipped off his shoes, leaving them haphazardly under the coat rack. He was tired. It hadn't been easy to locate Sawada's son Toshiro; the fact that he was hiding with a former Metropolitan police detective had been an additional challenge.

Seishiro suppressed a yawn and turned his attention to the neat stack of letters on the small hallway table next to the warded steps. A white fuda gleamed on top of them — just in case.

Subaru was careful, but his caution wouldn't help much. The letter in question had been in the normal daily mail, otherwise it wouldn't have ended up in Yoshino's hands, and the tracer attached to it had still been active. There were only three options: the tracer was precisely set and the only reason it hadn't connected with Yoshino was Subaru's unlucky timing — Seishiro judged the chance for that to be negligible. It was more likely that they were dealing with a personalized tracer specifically designed to attach to his brand of magic, or with a multi-layered tracer that reported everybody it encountered. In both cases, Subaru's warning was justified; the marks had to be contaminated.

A small thread of smoke arose from the stack of mail under Seishiro's dark look. He knew of only a handful of onmyoji capable of a personalized or a multi-layered tracer, discounting himself and Subaru — that left Romiro, because Subaru's grandmother wouldn't peel strips of skin off a living child just to inconvenience him.

It was possible that Romiro expected him to be careless, considering the amount of work on his hands and the mounting pressure from the client. Seishiro ground his teeth. Now, they would see who of them was more ruthless. The small stack of letters burst into flames, staining the table underneath.

~::~::~~

"Uh?" Subaru blinked sleepily in the dark. The only light was the red glow from the LED display of the alarm clock: 03:48. The blinds were closed. He reached for the bedside lamp—

A hard hand gripped his neck, pressed him face down into the sheet. "No! I—" He tried to kick, but a heavy weight came down onto his lower back. He couldn't bring his hands under him.

"If you believe you've got a say in this, you're mistaken," Seishiro's voice said just next to his ear. "Keep yourself shielded or you'll regret it."

Subaru squirmed as teeth grazed his pulse. Metal glided over his skin, cutting away his underwear. "Don't you da—" His legs were spread apart, exposing him. "Don't—" A knee pinned his left thigh painfully to the bed. "Seish—" Something slick was dripped onto him, followed by— "—ah." Fingers traced over his entrance, massaging, tantalizing. His breaths were short angry bursts into the rumpled sheet, when his body betrayed him, opening readily, aroused against his will.

"Relax or you'll bleed."

Subaru was entered, spread. He gasped. Pain mingled with pleasure when Seishiro pulled him up, framing him with his legs. Subaru nearly panicked; a firm hand on his abdomen pressed him down, keeping him completely speared; the other held him upright, caressing his chest, moving up to his face. Fingers forced his mouth open, dipped into it. He tried to bite, but a firm grip blocked his jaw. He moaned. The hand clasped his face, two fingers on his tongue. He couldn't swallow, couldn't— Saliva dripped over his chin.

Heat. Helplessness. The world defined by the contact, the hand on his skin, in his mouth, being held, taken...

Delirious, he pressed himself down, impaled himself deeper, begging for more...

"Touch yourself," Seishiro's voice ordered dispassionately in the dark.

He obeyed, finding himself unable to resist, his swollen flesh hot against his palm. His wrist trembled against the arm still holding his lower body firm while Seishiro moved slowly, sensually inside him. His head spun. He—

"Harder."

He struggled to follow the cold command. Seishiro's wet hand abandoned his mouth, gripped his throat, forcing his body into a faster, stronger rhythm. Subaru gasped; his body tightened, strained—

The arm stopped pressing him down; Seishiro's hand closed over his tip. With a strangled sound Subaru came into the hot palm; the tremor of his release had Seishiro spilling inside him. His head fell back onto Seishiro's shoulder. Eyes closed in the dark; the world reduced to touch and scent, taste and sound...

Seishiro inside him. The musky odor of sweat and sex...

The sweat he licked, dazed, from Seishiro's throat. Racing heartbeats gradually slowing against his back...

The first light of dawn trickled through the blinds. Seishiro released his throat, laid cool fingers against his brow, stroking his hair back, drawing something with saliva, whispering. His voice was a velvet caress against Subaru's sweat-damp brow: "I told you you'd pay me."

The black shadow of a hand covered his eyes.

Darkness.

When Subaru woke up he was alone in the large bed. Naked beneath the coverlet, his legs still spread. His seed had been cleaned off him, but a squishy feeling told him that nothing else had been removed. The house was silent, empty; the susurrant voices of the dead protecting it were no longer singing. Seishiro was gone. But he'd left no doubt about his power over Subaru.

Naked, Subaru studied himself in the mirror, laid cold fingertips onto the dark marks Seishiro had left on the pale skin of his throat and shivered again at the memory of long fingers invading his mouth, forcing him open, drawing on his skin...

Minuscule crystals glittered in the harsh light of the halogen lamp above the mirror. He craned his neck and tried to decipher the symbol drawn in dried saliva on his forehead.

~Shield~.

His mirror image frowned at him. A second character was outlined on his cheek, one he hadn't even realized had been drawn. This one was drawn with semen.

~Seclusion~

No wonder he couldn't feel Seishiro's presence any more. It wasn't the house that was silenced. It was him. The spell lay like rime ice on his skin and—

Something wet and sticky trickled down his legs. Avoiding his mirror image, Subaru used a towel to wipe himself clean and limped to the shower. Rinsing away the rest, he thought resignedly that expecting Seishiro to use a condom was probably asking too much.

Of course he hadn't used one, Subaru concluded grimly, standing under the streaming water. Vamachara. The invasive. The forbidden. The spell woven around him wouldn't have worked then. He turned the water as hot as he dared and harshly rubbed the characters off his face. The ice around him remained.

Something gleamed in the sunlight on the table when he came into the kitchen half an hour later to make himself tea. A note, handwritten and secured with the honey jar, waited for him:

~Change the sheets.~

~::~::~::~~

Tatekawa-cho, Sumida-ku, Tokyo

11:12

1-8-7 Tatekawa turned out to be a sprawling, six-storey apartment complex of nondescript architecture uncompromisingly designed for functionality. Its white painted walls were decorated with a few spots of orange and blue-grey lining the windows and the storey levels. The only decoration of the entrance area was a slightly withered potted plant under the bill board.

Seishiro didn't need to study the twenty-odd names listed on it to know that his target lived on the fifth floor. The entrance door led to a narrow but clean corridor with two elevators on the left and a staircase on the right.

Seishiro took the stairs. The metal railing was lacquered in orange, gleaming in the light coming from the small windows on each turn. Somebody had put a cactus on the windowsill on the fourth floor, a label with a smiling flower dangling down from it. Childish characters proclaimed proudly, "Strawberry cactus-san belongs to Aika-chan". A little pink plastic watering can stood on the floor underneath.

The door to the fifth floor opened soundlessly. The building seemed deserted at this time of day. Seishiro crossed the hallway swiftly. Black gloves ensured that he wouldn't leave fingerprints anywhere in the building. Hashiba's door sported a modern lock, smooth and clearly well-maintained; a sophisticated system with an interesting set of internal specifications well above the overall standard of the house. Seishiro smiled.



The opening mantra which was coming to life within the pentagram his fingertip drew around it didn't care about specifications.

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
11:24

Subaru sniffed the tea, sipped it, had it burn his tongue and put the cup back down onto the table. He'd tried to break the frost on his skin again and again, but it hugged him too tightly to allow for any leverage. Shivering, he slung his arms around himself, trying in vain to squeeze some of the warmth that his spirit missed into his body. His fingers dug into his skin, long, hard, until his nails drew blood, coloring the rime pink.

Like cherry blossoms.

He had participated in its construction, unknowing of course, unwitting, but that didn't count in Seishiro's brand of magic. The pentagram stood for Matter over Spirit. In other words: carnal reality over chaste intentions.

Subaru balled his fists. In truth, he'd been anything but unwilling, anything *but* chaste.

Frustrated, he scratched at the ice on his skin and the cold cut into him. He closed his eyes, forced the hurt back and searched for a crack in the shield...

There was none, just a spot where clear sensations whispered through the frosted ice obscuring everything else. He should shield himself. He didn't. He couldn't. He felt...

...whispered words spoken elsewhere. A young man, barely in his twenties yet, was looking up at him into a face that wasn't Subaru's, a face he just knew sported a kind smile, speaking words of damnation. "A metagenetic virus is encoded in your cerebral cortex. In a few years you will accidentally release it, causing more than five million deaths worldwide."

"So I have to die instead?" the youth asked quietly, too composed for his years. The reaction of someone who'd already seen too much.

"Yes."

"I can't escape?"

"No."

The youth lowered his gaze briefly. "Will it hurt?"

"Not this time."

There was no strike, no torn flesh that tightened around his wrist, no frantic flutter of a dying heart against his pulse about which Subaru still had nightmares. The spell wasn't even voiced. The youth's incredible wide eyes dilated further in the shadow Seishiro's body cast over him, almost cradling him. His last breath was a whisper, a name. "Hashiba..."

"Sayonara, Toshiro-kun."

Tears spilled down Subaru's cheeks. He rubbed them away angrily, but more followed, drawing glittering traces over the rime on his skin and reminding him of the cold he hadn't felt moments ago. Was that what Hokuto's death had been like?

Would it have been like that to be killed by Seishiro?

~::~::~~

Tatekawa-cho, Sumida-ku, Tokyo  
11:28

The boy in the living room of the small apartment looked peaceful, as if he was merely sleeping, when Seishiro turned and left the place. Outside, he slipped an unused sim card and the battery into the cell and called the office. "Target executed. I am continuing with the order. Place an emergency call for 1-8-7 Tatekawa, Apartment V-2, Hashiba. Tell the press that representative Sawada's only son has died unexpectedly of unknown causes. Make sure they learn the address." He flipped the cell closed and removed the battery. After a moment, the small phone on his palm dissolved in a gust of petals, and the Tree complained about the lack of nutrient in his diet.

*Don't worry*, Seishiro laughed faintly in his thoughts. *You're going to get dessert*. He pushed through the door of a small cafe, took a seat at a table near the window and ordered a latte. Outside, he heard the first sirens. Flashing police cars stopped in front of the house down the street. The waitress, setting the coffee down in front of him, threw a concerned look through the window.

"Do you have an idea what happened down there?" she asked.

"No," Seishiro shrugged. "But it seems to be something serious."

"You think so?"

"There are a lot of official vehicles," he nodded towards the commotion outside, where the usual chaos of policemen, detectives, medics, coroners, and curious neighbors took shape. Reporters swarmed the place. The news and television vans were already circling the house for the best views. Seishiro smiled, hidden behind his coffee cup. A quick response — but then, the crime scene was the apartment of a former detective, the victim the son of a Diet member. He took a sip of his coffee and found it surprisingly tasteful.

If not the death of his son, then the risk of the press not seeing him mourning said son would flush Sawada out here — into a neighborhood beyond the central surveillance ring. He didn't have to wait long. Outside, a police car raced past the shop window, followed by a black armored limousine forcing its way through the masses. Sawada. Face ashen, bodyguards positioned...

Seishiro emptied his cup slowly and signaled the waitress for the check. Time to go to work again.

He struck in midst of the crowd, right between Sawada's nervous bodyguards. Swift. Precise. A minor spell took care that the blood didn't stain his coat when he didn't pull out immediately. He watched the horror creep into Sawada's eyes as he realized his impending death, watched the pain of the heart being held by another's hand inside the chest register with the man. Sawada opened his mouth. Instead of words, dark blood flowed over his lips. The scream was nothing but a faint burble.

Seishiro straightened his arm, felt his hand breaking through the back; only then did he push himself free. He carefully maintained an illusion of Sawada first talking with him, then with somebody who had a vague similarity to himself, so that later, witnesses would confuse them. He slung his coat over his arm, hiding his bloodstained hand from the cameras, waving cell phone and notebook in the other — just another reporter who worked himself out of the din to call his editor about a news tidbit he'd just caught.

A faint ache throbbed in his temples. The spell around the illusion was complex, including reluctance to address, to touch, even to look towards its center. It covered a large area making sure every camera pointed elsewhere while the illusion of a seemingly heartbroken representative Sawada hid the truly heartbroken representative Sawada underneath. He allowed the illusion to spurt blood and crumble, finally matching the reality after he'd crossed around the corner onto the Shiohashi-dori.

The intense magical emanations of the Tree processing its prey surged against his shields; Sawada's spirit was already hopelessly entangled in the Sakura's powerful grasp. Toshiro wouldn't meet his father in the other world or in his next life.

Seishiro crossed the busy street swiftly, disregarding the marked pedestrian crossing some twenty meters away. On the other side, a small shrine was wedged between two high rises, and he needed a quiet place for what was to come next. He'd used the Tree's power for magical purification before; he knew it was potent enough to bring him to his knees once he got started. And because Romiro's magic was so closely related to his own that disentangling it would be complicated, he'd have to begin soon, while the Tree's magical signature was flaring at full strength.

He sat down on a small bench and finally checked on his marks, making sure Subaru's rime shield was still in place. Immediately, he felt the contamination in his marks spilling over to him. He clenched his teeth; made sure that the Tree's power was at its peak, and dropped his shields.

The noise of a city train rattling past the back fence covered his scream of agony.

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

19:34

Heat was assaulting the ice on his skin. Spiritual flames licked along the thick rime that sizzled and steamed, evaporating faster and faster. The shield was fraying, its dreaded cold giving way to whatever it had kept from him, and now he was drenched in sweat. Subaru heard the Tree humming, saw in his mind's eye a trapped spirit being torn apart by greedy shoots. Petals lined in blood seemed to rain down his skin in wicked, tantalizing caresses, streaming in the rhythm of the screams, licentiously calling on him to follow them into their eternal night of pleasure and blood, where lust and death were relatives...

...and the Sakurazukamori's coldness wasn't cruelty...

...it was mercy.

A key clicked in the front door lock and he tensed, feeling his body, his spirit throb against his confinement as he struggled for composure. The rustle of a coat being hung up, the faint thud with which the leather shoes ended up on the shoe board, followed by the soft padding of socked feet on the stairs — Seishiro usually forwent slippers at home. Keys were put on the table with a metallic jingle.

"Tadaima."

Subaru didn't answer, clasping himself as he kept staring out the window at trees he had ceased to see hours ago, blinded by tears for a boy who had died without pain.

"Subaru-kun?"

He heard Seishiro come closer across the living room and closed his eyes, clinging to his anger.

"Release me," he demanded. He spoke flatly, tonelessly, because otherwise he'd surely be yelling now, or worse. "Why did you do this to me?"

"It was necessary," Seishiro returned casually, entirely too close for Subaru's comfort in his weakened state. "You don't know what you would have faced."

"You. Killing two people," Subaru stated evenly, finally turning, looking at him, catching the quickly veiled surprise in those amber eyes. "Marks can't be blocked. Your own words." He clenched his hands tightly around his elbows to keep from lashing out; lashing meant touching, touching meant— He laughed. A bitter sound in his own ears. "If a nightmare is all you can see, you're glad to see it."

"That's not—"

"I know that your Tree's tearing the spirits apart!" Subaru spat. "I've seen it. I've *been there!*" He dug his nails through the cloth of his shirt into his skin. "I know what you are, *Sakurazukamori*. Release me!"

He didn't flinch when Seishiro put a bloodstained fingertip to his cheek...

...and the flames closed around him. Subaru choked, coughing in the heat that ate the last fragments of ice and burned into his skin, consuming him. There were hands on his body— He pushed them away, panicked—

"Stop fighting or it'll kill you."

Ice enclosed the flames that sizzled and died where Seishiro touched him, brushing, stroking, removing clothes that were no protection at all.

No words. The breath in his mouth wasn't his own. It tasted of sex and sakura, blood and tobacco...

Running his hands, his arms under Seishiro's shirt, he chose the Sakurazukamori's chill against the heat, calming himself enough to finally sort through the magical chaos burning in him — his own, Seishiro's, the Sakura's — bound by the Vamachara relentlessly demanding its due.

A demand they couldn't deny. He kept his eyes closed, just feeling, smelling, tasting. His fingertips ghosted down Seishiro's skin, his abdomen, met the leather of his belt. He tugged at it. The buckle gave way; its pin pierced his thumb. Involuntarily, he raised it to his mouth, sucked at it. With a sharp motion, Seishiro completed the task below, raised him up, spreading him. Subaru slung his legs around him, gasping when his back hit the wall, and let Seishiro take him, slowly, methodically, the buckle of Seishiro's open belt cutting into his thighs.

He buried his face against Seishiro's neck when he climaxed seconds after Seishiro had come with a guttural sound of pain deep inside him.

They ended up on the floor when Seishiro couldn't support him any longer. Aching, Subaru leaned against the wall; Seishiro, framed by his legs, rested his head on his shoulder, breathing heavily. The unbuttoned shirt had slipped off. A deep, faintly red scar lay thick on the otherwise smooth, well-honed muscle; a dragon of torn flesh hissing across Seishiro's shoulder and down his back. Subaru shivered, tracing it. Seishiro would always be marked a Dragon of Earth. It had been an awful wound, inflicted not too long ago. And there were other scars — Subaru tugged at the sweat-soaked cloth of the shirt — flat, pale, barely more than silvery tint in the skin. He'd seen the Tree deal with Seishiro's injuries; these must be remnants of times when its power hadn't sufficed. How many more had there been? How often—?

Shaken, he pressed his lips to the marred flesh where the dragon scar curled over Seishiro's shoulder, slung his arms around him in the realization how often he'd been close to losing him, too, to—

"If you continue this, I give no guarantees for your health." Seishiro's calm voice sent a shiver down Subaru's spine. He tightened his grip involuntarily, holding him even closer, unwilling to let go. A tremor ran through the body in his arms; muscles, slick from sweat, tensed—

"But you like it—" Subaru whispered.

The next moment a hard arm across his larynx pinned him to the ground. A knee forced his legs apart. Pain tore through his body. Seishiro watched him out of impassive pale golden eyes as he drove into him with hard, deliberately grinding thrusts. Subaru choked, unable to scream. Suffocating, he clawed at the arm, the face—

He coughed violently, gasping for air, when the pressure was suddenly gone.

With cold precision Seishiro struck at his chest—

—and was stopped by a twig whose bark cut deep into his wrist. A second twig followed, pulling him back and up on his feet. A third lashed over his cheek with a sickening slap.

...*No!*...

Wide-eyed, panting, Subaru saw Seishiro stilling in the Sakura's grasp. Blood beaded from the streak on his cheek; his breaths were short, angry gasps as he stood utterly calm, waiting for the Sakura to release him.

Buds sprung from the twig holding Seishiro's wrist, burst into blossoms, greedily absorbing the blood it had drawn. A single tuft of flowers reached for his cheek, dabbing at the streak—

Seishiro's cold eyes stopped it. With a sharp twist, he freed his wrist from the suckling blossoms and left the room.

A rough, uncushioned twig curled sharply around Subaru's maltreated throat, pulling him halfway off the floor. A wave of disdain rushed over him, through him.

*...Don't you dare do that again. Next time, I won't stop him, Second-source-of-the-Dao...*

He fell hard against the wall when the Sakura was suddenly gone, leaving only its heavy scent and a few scattered petals. For a moment, Subaru just remained sitting where he was, trying to catch his breath, then he forced himself to stand. Wobbly, he clung to the wall as the room spun around him, fearing he would be sick. He felt raw. The hand he touched to the wetness between his legs came away bloody.

His marks were screaming at him. He couldn't raise his shields...

Seishiro was next door, on his bed, dead even to the flaring scars on his hands...

Aching and cold Subaru curled up beside him, not daring to touch him, but moving closer and closer until the glow on his hands faded in the dark.

## 07 — August Fires

Wind whispered in the Sakura's thick crown. A blossom tuft danced along a pale memorized cheek. Hair moved in the wind with the blossoms: wavy black and long braided grey. Eyes glittered in the dark: fiery gold and icy silver.

*...The Sakurazukamori is to be my eyes and ears in the world, my guide to the realm of the living. He is the sword in the shadows, the invisible one to stand and watch those in the light, the final rectifier. He is not to see the intention, but to see reality and to act if it endangers the realm of the dead and the living.*

*They are Sumeragi. They are visible. They walk the light and live the lie.*

*The Sakurazukamori is invisible. He walks the shadows. He acts the truth.*

*They say he kills for a living...*

The Sakura's mighty branches quivered in winds blowing in both realms.

*...but so do they...*

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
August 16, 1992

The evening was quiet when Subaru closed the fusuma separating his rooms from the main hall, shutting out the lights of the rest of the house. In the gloom lit only by the fires outside, he leaned against the wooden frame for a brief moment. His head was still spinning from the conversation with his grandmother; not that it had been anything but a soliloquy on her part...

He'd known the talk was coming, though he hadn't expected it to come so soon. Disillusioned, he pushed himself off the wall.

The shoji to the garden were still removed and smoke filled the air, creating halos around the fire bowls along the driveway. A lacquer tablet, holding a shallow cup and decanter, was set out for him. It was the night of the Gozan no Okuribi, when five large bonfires were lit on the mountains surrounding Kyoto; the last night of O-Bon. Water drunk tonight with all five Daimonji fires reflecting in the cup protected against illness. And his clan wanted him to be healthy...

He poured a few sips of water into the cup and left the shadow of the engawa, stepping down onto the grass. The night's air was hot and humid; no wind thinned the smoke trapped under the low-hanging clouds. North of the estate the last of the fires had been lit on the Torimoto, painting the clouds above his head a deep blood-red.

Subaru stood silently in the unsteady dark. The rippling surface of the water in his shallow cup blurred the reflections of the fires, betraying his insufficient composure. Yesterday, he'd held the first year memorial service in the name of Seishi Buddha for his sister. He'd called out for her again, searched her, prayed, begged her to come... but he'd been alone in the spirit chamber between the fires. Again.

And now his mourning for Hokuto was ended. The mofuku had already been wrapped in rice paper and stored—

Water spilled over the edge of his cup, staining the grey sleeve of his kimono. They weren't wasting time. He'd been told that the mochi rice offering was scheduled for tomorrow.

The first fire on Mount Daimonji had nearly burned down when Subaru emptied his cup in a single draft.

Fushimi-ku, Kyoto (South)  
Mikage Family Residence  
August 17, 1992 (Tomobiki)

Subaru sat very still, very straight in the rear of the large family limousine so as not to wrinkle the kimono or the wide hakama pants that went with it.

"The Mikage family is associated with the Fushimi Inari-taisha shrine. The women of their family traditionally serve there as miko. They're a very respectable family—"

His grandmother's voice flowed over him, past him, became a susurrant murmur in the background. Outside, the Kujo-dori was crossing the Kamo river. Soon, they would turn south towards Fushimi-ku and the Inari shrine with its thousands of torii lining the paths to the top of the hill with its divine mirror...

When he'd been seven or eight years old, they'd visited it to pay their respects to Amaterasu and pray for his successful inauguration. Subaru remembered tunnels made of torii, worming their way up the hill towards the main idol. Even at midday they'd been haunted by vermilion shadows, some so dark that there were lanterns hung from the torii, but not all of them had been lit.

He'd skipped away along one of the rear paths where no torii obscured the sun, following a fox cub loping through a bamboo grove...

...until he'd found it sitting on the roots of a gnarled sakura, waiting for him, panting. The big ears had been constantly moving, as if listening to someone. He'd watched in awe how its pink tongue had darted out to lick a pink petal off its black nose. It had been early summer; the sun had caught in the divine mirror, but this sakura had still had flowers—

"Subaru-san, are you listening?" his grandmother said sternly at his side, calling his attention back to the here and now, where the car was slowing to turn into a driveway lined by tall, meticulously pruned trees. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you that this is a very important event. We will arrive soon."

*Soon.* The word reverberated in his mind as he got out of the car. His grandmother would wait outside. It wasn't appropriate for her to come in with him — that much of the ancient tradition of a suitor's nightly visits to his bride-to-be<sup>17</sup> was preserved — and he wondered why she'd come at all. Did she expect him to bolt?

A shiver crept down his spine when the door opened and a young man, probably of his age, stepped out and bowed, wordlessly inviting him in. A younger son of the house, judging by the kamon crest on the formal haori jacket. Uneasy under the silent scrutiny Subaru walked up the stairs.

Truth was, he was afraid. He'd faced the Sakurazukamori — had been entangled, broken, bloodied by him — and he hadn't been afraid, but this...

He was shown into a large traditional room. The bedstead set up there had certainly never been slept in. The white cloth of the futon was untouched, the ofuda sewn to its cover unwrinkled. A shrine of the family gods had been set up next to it. Reverence lights burned in front of Inari, the rice god, flanked by kitsune portrayed in delicate figurines rather than symbolic tablets.

A kitsune had once led him to the blooming sakura...

Startled, he tore his gaze free and bowed deeply in front of Mikage-sama, sitting on a raised cushion by the bed next to his wife, awaiting his application. Other members of the clan sat in a wide half-circle behind them. He wondered if Akiko-san was among them. His guide had taken a seat at the right end of the circle, still looking at him. They were all looking at him.

He was here to take one of theirs away from them.

"Akiko." The low voice of the Mikage clan head stopped his thoughts. "Bring the mochi for your fiancé."

"Yes, father." A delicate woman rose from the place beside his former guide and went to retrieve a covered lacquer tray. She didn't look up as she offered the rice cakes to her parents first, until her mother nodded at her to indicate she was to hold the tray out for him.

Subaru wondered if she was as nervous as he. If so, it didn't show in her performance. The tray didn't shake in the least. He almost choked on the formal words when he took one of the cakes, ritually binding himself to her.

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
August 20, 1992 (Taian)

The shoji to the spirit chamber had been removed. Reverence lights burned in front of the tiers holding the grave tablets of his clan's deceased, his clan's guardian spirits. He lowered his gaze, trying not to look past his bride at the newest tablet, on the lowest shelf in the outermost corner. He knew his sister's tablet was the lightest. One year wasn't enough to darken sakura wood...

How many years did it take to turn sakura wood black?

Or was blood needed for that? Blood and dark magic and—

Concerned, he leaned forward, scrutinizing Hokuto's tablet for dark lines — and was relieved to find it pristine white. Silk rustled next to him. He dared a glance at his bride as he returned to the proper posture and spotted a smooth strand of glossy hair that had escaped the tight, complicated knot on her head. She seemed to listen attentively to the declaration of his family members, never raising her eyes, never wavering...

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17 During the age of aristocracy a bridegroom would nightly visit his bride at her home and only after the birth of a child or the loss of parents to the bridegroom or husband, the bride would be accepted as the wife in the man's home. The personal will of men and women for marriage was ignored in the face of family interests. Marriages were arranged by and for families.

He wondered how it felt to have a funeral ceremony held for you in your presence, to know that your name was crossed out in the family registry and that the house had been swept with salt to purify it after you left. She'd been sent from her home without a secure position in his. Had she had a say in the matter? Had—

A miko bowed in front of him, offering a list of the Mikage family members on white washi paper. A similar list had been given to their guests when his grandmother had begun speaking. Startled, he realized that he hadn't been following the ceremony. Akiko's father had already begun to read the list of the family members present. They were a large clan, and the reading took accordingly long.

When he finished, a miko brought the obi for Subaru to give to his bride, the traditional gift symbolizing female virtue, while he received a hakama in return, expressing her hope for male fidelity.

Then the ceremony continued with the exchange of the remaining nine yuino gifts, already laid out on a low table stretching between the two families sitting opposite each other. The gifts would be exchanged between different members of the families to tie the two clans together.

Akiko-san's Aunt presented the delicately woven strands of dried kelp to his grandmother, a symbol of fertility, expressing the Mikages' wish for them to have a large family. Subaru felt his face growing hot at her suggestive words. He was glad when she settled back down.

Next came hemp fibers and the wish for strong ties and cooperation in marriage. Subaru recognized the giver as his guide three days ago. Mikage Ayato was indeed a younger son — and Akiko's twin brother. He restricted himself to the blandest formalities to express his desire for the couple to get old together. Subaru met the silent threat in his eyes quietly, wondering how he would have felt when giving Hokuto away to another. Would he have been as angry at his future brother-in-law as Ayato-san seemed to be? Or...

His heart constricted at the thought that he'd never know the answer to that and he was glad when one of his relatives bowed to take the long fibers out of Ayato's hands and the ceremony proceeded with suehigo fans — symbols of expanding happiness...

It was well into the afternoon when the exchange ended and the families mingled for the traditional dinner. Paper lanterns were lit in the garden. Sake was offered, but Subaru didn't touch his cup. Laughter arose, delighted Mikages expressed their happiness for A-chan to marry so well. Subaru shivered, knowing that right now servants and miko were sweeping the large hall, replacing the fusuma, setting up a sanctuary of semi-transparent shoji and moving the kamidana.

Amaterasu was to watch over him tonight, over... them.

Shadows danced over the engawa, making it easy to slip away from the reception. The fire bowls, lit despite the August heat, guttered in the wet, humid air. Weddings were things of spring and autumn, not summer. But autumn was too far away for the elders to contemplate waiting.

He sat down on the edge, stared out across the estate, spotted dark shadows patrolling its borders. He'd asked for the security to be dropped. It had been reinforced instead. They carried modern weapons — he'd wondered how his grandmother had acquired the necessary permissions for those — and he didn't have to use his gift to see the protective charms around their necks and wrists. Most of them were practitioners anyway.

They were meant to keep danger out...

They were keeping him in.

The sickle of a last quarter moon hung over Mount Arashiyama on the other side of the river. Somewhere in the falling night, a fox wailed and Subaru slumped deeper into the uneasy shadows. Soon...

"Here," a quiet male voice said and a glass filled with amber liquid and ice cubes was held out for him. Surprised, Subaru glanced up at Omi Tono, who gave him a wry smile. "You look like you need it."

"I cannot—"

"It's tea." Omi took a seat on the edge of the engawa beside him. Unasked. "I know how you feel," he said after a moment.

"You—"

"I was terrified on my own day." He hesitated a moment, when Subaru remained silent, Omi shrugged. "You'll manage, don't worry." He winked. "I mean, it's nothing your parents didn't manage as well, eh?"

"Sounds like something Hokuto would say," Subaru sighed, holding the cold glass against his aching forehead and resting his eyes for a moment.

"She did." Omi laughed faintly. "When I tried to hide from my own night. And if your grandmother had caught her three years ago, she'd have been in for it." He grew serious. "She was a special person, Subaru-san. And she wanted you to be happy, no matter what." He gathered himself up.

"Omi-san." Subaru said quietly before the other onmyoji could cross around the corner back to the festivities. Subaru gave him a small grateful nod. "Thank you."

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence

The sanctuary had been set up using his room and parts of the great hall. The walls were entirely made of shoji through which the light of the fire bowls outside filtered into the room, giving a soft, warm touch to the dark polished floor while drawing the ofuda with blessings and protection spells on the walls outside as dark shadows onto the paper. It smelled of anise and jasmine; a censer with the traditional wedding incense<sup>18</sup> was burning in front of the kamidana; flickering reverence lights turned the ancient wood of Amaterasu's tablet in its center into a deep, intense gold.

The furniture of the room was sparse and couldn't have been more functional. Pale new tatami mats framed with red brocade bearing regularly-spaced white pentacles, the family kamon, covered two thirds of the floor, leaving free a tatami-width of deep brown wood in front of each paper wall. A wide futon made up with unbleached cotton took up the center of the room; a small black lacquer table with sake cups stood next to it, nothing else.

Light was provided by a wide lantern suspended from the ceiling. Subaru lowered his gaze. Every move in here would become a shadow on the shoji, observed by unseen eyes outside: private without any privacy. He suppressed a shiver running down his spine. His head throbbed as he knelt down in a corner of the tatami; the altered scent dizzied him. He missed the strong wood notes of Jinko and Sandalwood that normally pervaded his incense. Lightly resting his hands on his knees he called upon his meditation skills to pray for Amaterasu's protection.

One of the shoji was opened. A woman sat outside, her face downcast, almost hidden behind her long open hair, the white kimono folded neatly around her legs. She bowed before she slipped inside, knelt and closed the shoji behind her.

Mikage Akiko, soon to be Sumeragi.

She would become his wife, would have the run of his house, his finances, his 'family', his life. She would become *obaa-san*— Subaru felt his lips quiver in wry mirth at the thought; a mirth that quickly died when he remembered that he was expected to touch her.

The shadows of the protective ofuda attached to the paper walls flickered across the room as the fire bowls on the engawa flared in a gust of wind. The scent of rice straw from the fresh tatami mats mingled with the overwhelming tang of the incense when she sat in front of him, her hands neatly folded in her lap, waiting. For him. He was frozen in place, mortified at the prospect of making the first step, of—

"Sumeragi-sama?"

The soft alto voice startled him, made him look up into dark brown eyes. Her expression was demure yet determined to fulfill her duty to his clan and her own. She offered the sake dish with unwavering determination. She knew that the Sumeragi followed the old tradition: should a child come out of this, she would be his wife. If not...

He swallowed dryly. There was no 'if not'; everybody knew... they'd hurt her; there'd be talk... He knew how hurtful even unintentional callousness could be, had seen it in Mitsuki's mind<sup>19</sup>, the wounds left by the careless remarks of people who didn't even know it was her, and Akiko— Everybody knew, and she knew they knew. That was worse.

He didn't want to be the reason for her to be hurt, but he didn't want to hurt her, either. In his work he'd seen so much pain... He had to be careful, but he felt so light-headed. The room's atmosphere was suffocating, making it difficult for him to focus on his breathing. His skin tingled. He yearned for fresh air—

"Sumeragi-sama, don't you feel well?" she asked, looking at him in concern.

It was as if a hand clasped his throat, constricting his breath.

"Shall I send for—?" Worried, she put the dish aside, reached for him.

Darkness danced in front of his eyes, obscuring his vision. His heartbeat throbbed in his ears. He wanted to shove her away. No, he couldn't do that, but he struggled just to breathe in the searing heat that had his chest spasm with pain.

Something touched his face. Her words didn't make sense, but the contact was cool on his burning skin, brought relief from the heat... He reached for it, grasped it, clung to it, but it wasn't enough. He was still burning, needed more, closer contact to find his breath, his hold. If only his head didn't hurt so much—

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18 Incense ingredients can be sorted according to the five elements and the Buddha families. Considering the "emotional makeup" of Liquid Fire (Fire + Water) I made up for Subaru in chapter 3, he needs incense made from Clove and Sandalwood (or Jinko) to call on Fire & Water and transmute Aversion & Desire. Some of the Earth ingredients would help to ground him. The last thing he needs is anything of Air (Jasmine) or Ether (Anise).

Jinko. Japanese for Eaglewood (or Aloeswood). A very expensive incense ingredient associated with Water and the Transmutation of Ignorance (Vairocana Buddha).

19 Kuburagi Mitsuki is the victim in Tokyo Babylon Vol. 2 Dream. From the wording in the German edition she seems to be the first person, in whom Subaru went Within. Seishiro suspected that she'd been Subaru's 'first love'.



"...go. Please." Someone begged, then cried, "Let me go!"  
Panicked, he lashed out, desperately clawing for a hold as he fell— fell—

...there was blood on the tatami, blotting out the white family crests where it soaked from his hands into the brocade lining. Its metallic tang smothered the incense... helped him breathe...

He was lying on his side, aching, unable to move, to... There were hushed words, running feet, voices, scared... angry... One of the shoji in his sight was pushed back. There was a hand print on it. Red... blood?  
Spilled blood...

He had to get up, had to cover the kamidana...

People rushed in, some faltering in their steps, others...

Large hands closed around his wrists. Others checked his hands, his body...

He tried to sit up, but the man holding him down strengthened his grip; safe, comforting... His eyes closed. He was so very tired... and cold... so cold...

Someone was whimpering outside, crying faintly. Akiko-san? Something had... happened... He...

They released him, stepped back. He shivered. A dark-clothed guard left in brisk strides—

The faint whirring of wheels announced his grandmother. The shoji was closed behind her. The guard taking position outside was a tall shadow around the bloodstain on it. Tatami rustled faintly under the wheels of her chair. He couldn't even raise his head to meet her eyes, when she stopped a step away, saying nothing. She didn't have to. He just felt her distanced eyes looking down on him, on his scarred, bloodied hands...

*Stained.* The word hung in the air.

He hoped, wished she'd tell him what happened. Nothing made sense...

"A..." he began. ...*kiko-san*?

Silence. The rustle of washi paper...

...followed by the silky flutter of his grandmother's shikigami circling him. The crane landed daintily and prodded his cheek briefly with its sharp black beak, before it settled down next to him.

"So you aren't bespelled," his grandmother concluded. "Leave us alone." She drew a deep breath when the remaining guards had left. "Subaru-san, what happened?"

He didn't have an answer. The crying outside had stopped...

Scared, he looked at her, desperately wanting to sit up, to touch her, be held by her like she'd held him a year ago. "A..." He choked on the name, coughed, and pain exploded in his chest, draining him further... It was dark here... dark... and cold... and...

Alone.

## 08 — Winter Flares

*The rough bark of the blossomless branch holding him rasped his skin, put pain into the pleasure. He didn't like it gentle. He liked to be reminded of the force, the pain that was always involved...*

*...in love or death...*

*...and the combination of both.*

*Sap and blood, the ultimate lubricant.*

*Branches wound around his shoulders and arms, twigs caressed his chest; a shoot entered the salivating mouth that gasped in the shuddering silenced heat.*

*It loved to subdue him, hold him, have his strong, predatory body convulsing hot around a sap-coated root curling deep inside him. Gasps, mindless moans. Sprouts milking the seed from the body, forcing him to spill on its roots, for once vulnerable despite his powers.*

*The scents of old blood and new, seed and sap, sakura and sweat overwhelmed the blossoms.*

*Gasps. Heat. The final convulsion — and sinking limp into the hold of the branches.*

*The Tree dabbed spilled seed and saliva from the unresponsive body, used a blossom-cushioned twig to clean him. He was sleeping, spent and totally the Sakura's in his submission.*

*Petals whispered of sensations long gone. Yue...*

*The Tree swayed, absorbed in its memories.*

*It would never take Sei-chan. She had made sure of that. For a while it had seemed otherwise, but the Tree knew that he would never submit — not after that night.*

*Yue had been strong, and willing to be weak sometimes. Seishiro would die before allowing himself to be weak even once.*

*The Tree had flirted, dared with Sei-chan, but there was a point beyond which he would fight in earnest, with all the means he had — and some he hadn't.*

*The Tree's branches shook in annoyance.*

*It should have stopped her, should have reined her in that night; instead it had been in her mind, watching, observing. It should have...*

*It hadn't.*

*Seishiro hadn't broken, but he retained scars that were able to break him. That was why the Tree would always push, but not force. Not him.*

*It had had enough broken Sakurazukamori over the years, thanks to the organization, the Mori, and what they considered appropriate mental conditioning. It needed a wake one, an inquisitive one; one able to understand and explain this new, rapidly changing world in which he was to bring in the prey.*

*It wanted Sei-chan. Whole. With his quick wit and open mind and strange notions and the ruthless curiosity all other Sakurazukamori had lacked since the organization had seized control after the fall of the Tokugawa.*

*If that meant it could touch but not take, so be it.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

March 30, 2000

Wind mourned in the trees outside; twigs and branches brushed against each other, filling the air with the scent of crushed green. Faint creaks told of the house cooling down in the night, but Subaru lay awake in the dark, the rhythm of his pounding heart repeating itself in his aching temples and the throbbing pain in his lower body.

Seishiro was a silent shadow beside him. A shadow he took pains not to touch, yet couldn't part from either; the marks made sure of that. There was barely a whisper of breath, not even the silken bedclothes rustled... as if Seishiro tried to disappear while sleeping, exhausted from too long a day, strong magic, sex...

...and something Subaru failed to grasp, except that the Sakura had saved him from dying for it. Dying at Seishiro's hand...

...a chill ran through his aching body. *How would it feel to be killed by Seishiro?* he'd asked himself only hours ago and had almost found out.

The scene replayed itself in his mind, again and again. Seishiro taking him in cold blood, strangely light pale golden eyes burning through him without seeing him, seeing instead... what?

Subaru shivered and stared at the ceiling, obscured in the night. If he hadn't been still slick from the sex before...

Bars of pale light wandered down the wall, becoming wider and brighter on their way towards the bed. The last quarter moon rose outside; its light fell through unshuttered blinds, rendering the sleeping man beside him in silvery plains and black shadows.

Seishiro had gone out of his way to keep the Final Battle from being decided, had told him "*Continue.*" And left.

But leaving was not an option any longer, for either of them; the tingle of the scars on his hands reminded him clearly.

And staying...

Subaru swallowed. They were the sources of the Dao. If they turned against each other, what would happen? A decision of the Final Battle? A return to the previous state of events? The end of existence? Or would it have no effect at all? He had no idea and neither did Seishiro, or he wouldn't be here any more. But if Seishiro went after him again and nobody intervened...

No, staying wasn't an option, either; not as long as he didn't know what had made Seishiro strike at him like that. And Seishiro was unlikely to answer any inquiries about it, at least not truthfully. If only he could just go and look—

Go *Within* and look—

Subaru froze. It wouldn't be consensual. It would be—

His left hand closed into a tightly balled fist on the black silk cover of the bed. He *had* to know. His grandmother would be appalled by his violation of one of their most fundamental laws, but... she'd be horrified at his current condition anyway, lacking entirely the purity she considered essential for his work. Purity, chastity, cleanliness; spiritual, and otherwise.

It should be impossible for him to work now, soiled and penetrated by Death — in the most literal sense. It wasn't. His nails dug into the skin of his palm. If Seishiro caught him, he would kill him...

It didn't matter. He forced himself to sit up despite the pain that had made him suspect fresh blood between his legs. The coverlet pooled around his naked form as he slowly reached over, ran trembling fingertips along Seishiro's slightly stubbled jaw in the mere ghost of a touch. Concentrating, he closed his eyes...

°°°Nobo. Akyasha. Kyarabaya. Onarikya. Maribori. Sowaka...°°°<sup>20</sup>

He felt the familiar thrill, the hush when he delved into another self, and yet it was different, more structured and warm. Was it because Seishiro was a master of the arts himself or because he was... Seishiro?

Subaru opened his eyes. A forest surrounded him, thick and dark, with giant black trees piercing a sky obscured by the fog wavering among them. Cascades of color poured over their leaves. A single leaf — colored purple, silver, and midnight blue — fluttered down to him. It cut through his skin, lining its edge with crimson. More leaves fell and Subaru leaped back, soon found himself dancing to avoid them. The fog lowered, became thicker, hiding ever more of the falling leaves before they made contact...

He was already covered in shallow cuts. Blood beaded on his skin in a vibrant red. Illusion. Protection. Brilliant. Sparkling. Seemingly infinite — and deadly. As deadly as—

He threw his arm up barely in time to protect his eyes, earning himself a deep bleeding cut across the forearm. Heavy wings beat the air over his head. A raptor screeched, black talons settling across the gash in his arm. Subaru staggered under the weight of the bird. A second scream almost deafened him and he found himself looking into unreadable golden eyes disconcertingly close to his face.

Seishiro's shikigami. Watching him, assessing, *judging*...

Just how much independence did Seishiro grant his helper spirit here? Subaru swallowed, knowing he could bring down the raptor, also knowing that he'd cripple Seishiro's abilities forever if—

The fall of the deadly leaves had stopped. With a piercing scream the large predator leaped free from his arm, sailed in a wide circle around him and vanished between the trees. Subaru chased after it.

He was out of breath when the shikigami finally settled on a tree overhanging a steep valley. Cautiously, Subaru came closer. The hawk paid him no heed as it stared down into the shadows. Wind ruffled its feathers and the sharp leaves of the tree it perched on. The black bark of the tree was rough under Subaru's palm when he peered over the edge...

...and found himself face to face with a boy in a featureless dark space. Wide, golden eyes over a snub nose looking at him as assessingly as the shikigami. The child was probably three years old, the face under the unruly, slightly wavy hair still childishly round. A plaster stuck on his scraped left knee. The boy stretched an arm out, pointed wordlessly on into the darkness...

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<sup>20</sup> °°°Nobo. Akyasha. Kyarabaya. Onarikya. Maribori. Sowaka...°°° taken from X-9 p 50-51

...where torches stuck in the snow-covered ground, drawing a wide circle of silent, dark-clad figures out of the night. Shikigami perched on their shoulders: some large, others small, round, or skinny with leathery or sharp-feathered wings; all of them predators.

A woman stood in their center. She was dainty, of a classical Japanese beauty, wearing a plain black silk kimono with only a single blood-red pentagram embroidered over her heart. Red shadows ran over the cloth and her smooth black hair that fell down to her hips, scandalously open for the night wind to play in. An owl perched on her shoulder. With its large eyes closed against the glare of the torches, it was a plump ball of fluffed feathers half-hidden in her hair.

Subaru slowly went closer, watching carefully. The snow crunched under his feet. Tiny ice crystals danced in the air, glittering in the cold silver light of a full moon.

A child, older than the boy before, stood in front of the woman, stripped down to a loin cloth despite the icy wind that blew his wavy hair into his face and called sparks from the torches. The dark stares of the group rested on his lean form. The shikigami on their shoulders moved restlessly, anticipating, hungry...

The boy's skin looked golden in the unsteady light of the flickering torches: golden and wet.

"Call your shikigami," the woman ordered. Her voice rang out into the night, the flames of the torches rippling from it. "Call your own or become prey for the others!"

The feathers of countless wings rustled; the call of a crow echoed through the winter night, hastily silenced by its master — a youth Subaru judged to be sixteen, tall like Seishiro had been under the Sakura all those years ago, but lacking his lithe elegance; there was no mistake about the distaste with which his grey eyes looked on...

Seishiro's inauguration.

Seishiro, whose golden eyes rested unwaveringly on the woman, his mistress of ceremony, his—

"Okaa-san." Seishiro's three-year-old self said next to Subaru, beaming up at him with a happy smile. "She told me, when I'll be nine."

Subaru involuntarily returned the smile. A fierce flash of raw power washed over them. Instinctively, he moved to protect the child and the boy hopped away from him into the glare, laughing at him in childish mockery for forgetting that this was Within, where the boy belonged and he didn't.

Subaru turned his attention back to the memory, found the eyes of the assembly resting on the tall raptor that flapped its wings in front of Seishiro, waiting to be acknowledged.

Seishiro, who looked at his mother. For guidance? Or approval? Instead, he got—

"Inappropriate!" A flash of her power scattered the essence of the hawk-shikigami. "You cannot keep what you can't hold!"

The child in front of her trembled. The assembly surrounding him shuffled restlessly. The dark predatory shadows of their birds of war focused on his small form. If he stumbled, if he failed, they'd tear him to pieces.

"Try anew!" she commanded. "Make it right!"

The full moon reflected in Seishiro's eyes, turning their deep gold to pale silver for a breath, while he gathered himself up, forced shaky legs to straighten, focused, stretched out his hand—

The flash of power nearly blinded Subaru. This shikigami spread even taller wings; its call was deeper, fiercer. The boy who'd called it was hardly a match for it.

"No, don't—" Subaru warned, but this was a memory, impossible to be changed. Worried, he saw young Seishiro raising his arm, making a fist and calling the bird to his blood. The shikigami settled immediately on his skinny wrist, driving black talons down to his bones, tying a lifelong bond as it fed.

Subaru saw nine-year-old Seishiro suddenly stumbling, falling into churned, blood-splattered snow. Nobody caught him, but the shikigami's strong wings broke the fall in the last moment. Nobody averted the sakanagi that resulted from calling two powerful shikigami to his side and binding the second one to himself.

Shocked, Subaru realized that surviving was another test. If Seishiro failed he wasn't worth the effort of help; if he prevailed, he didn't need it.

The world went dark....

...dark. Darkness, filled with the beating of strong wings, the swishing of countless feathers.

Voices arose out of the flutter. Male voices. There were no faces connected to the memory of them...

"What kind of bird is it, anyway?"

"A hawk. Rather large for the species and vicious." There was a brief pause. "He's by far the most promising of the aspirants, if he survives the backlash."

"Romiro won't like that."

A wry snort. "The hawk and the crow don't get along well?"

"No. We might have to make a choice early."

"Difficult. If he makes it, he'll be the most powerful Sakurazukamori we've had in ages."

"And probably impossible to control. Romiro's a safer choice."

"Safe, yes. But will he suffice?"

"He's older. He will win their fight."

"Now. But not in a few years."

"And he knows that. At least after today."

"True. We have to separate them. I'll take Seishiro with me to Tokyo. *She* can take care of him. You'll keep Romiro here in Kanazawa."

"For the time being. If Seishiro stays as unruly as he is—"

"—we will eliminate him in time. In his case, we have thirteen years left until he reaches the age of succession..."

Darkness. The hush of feathers now felt comforting...

...another night, years later. The room was unlit, but the garden outside was bathed in moonlight. A soft breeze moved the leaves and flowers on countless plants, artfully arranged and meticulously maintained. The faint tapping of a deerchaser gave rhythm to the whispers of the night. The disk of another full moon reflected in its small pond. Tatami mats rustled faintly under Subaru's feet as he stepped closer.

Silvery moonlight fell through the open shoji onto a futon rolled out on the floor. The youth sleeping there with his hair tousled by the headrest was barely a teen. Cicadas chirped outside; a few fireflies danced around the deerchaser...

A choked sniff had Subaru turn. Seishiro's three-year-old-self was hiding behind him, wiping angrily at his running nose with the back of his hand. His tiny fist cramped in the cloth of Subaru's pants and he tugged viciously. Tears ran over his cheeks as he tried to muffle a frightened sob.

"I'm afraid," the child whispered, scared. "I can't—" A sob. "*Onii-chan*, don't allow her to— to—" Helpless, Subaru saw the child vanishing, dissolving in a whirl of dust motes quickly scattering in the pale light.

The overwhelming scent of camellia filled the room. Behind him the futon rustled. A quiet voice whispered endearments.

The woman — "*okaa-san*" — knelt on the futon and removed the thin layer of cotton, touching the startled youth, preventing his escape with deceptively soft caresses...

"Keep yourself shielded..." she purred. "Or you'll—"

He struck, swift, hard, as he'd doubtlessly been taught. And she dipped her finger into the blood trickling over her cheek, licking at it, painting his lips with it. Seishiro's tongue involuntarily flicked across the wetness. "And, is my blood as sweet as yours?" she asked, her blood-stained hand going to his groin.

A faint whimper. A protest.

"Stopping?" she whispered as she touched him, straddled him, forced his inexperienced body to obey, using magic to hold him down, to subdue him. A magic strengthened by years of practice the youth under her couldn't possibly match. "But you like it—"

Subaru, caught in the memory, froze. His wanted to avert his eyes, to give privacy where he couldn't help, but he was bound, unable to look away, to—

He witnessed Seishiro's shock and his troubled uncertainty the next morning, when at waking-up he found himself nude and his mother smiling at him in amusement, her face unharmed, *unmarked*...

Subaru's nails dug into his palm. He just knew that no comfort had come. Seishiro had been alone with it. And managed. Somehow.

Other encounters followed in seemingly quick succession. Subaru watched Seishiro learn to accommodate, to reduce the hurt by taking the initiative and becoming the perpetrator, dominating the situation he couldn't avoid, until at fifteen he embraced his mother and took her last breath into his mouth...

...with a lover's kiss, covering himself with her blood.

Subaru trembled. The following years were a tumble of events: struggling for scholarships as a ward of the state, to avoid becoming dependent on the Mori again. Finding his path in a society he'd been merely allowed to watch and imitate before.

His enthusiasm for trying new things, meeting new challenges — like acrylic painting, resulting in a familiar picture and trouble in school for blue hair — and the curiosity that took him through high school and into university—

Subaru's head hurt. Dimly, he realized that he should have extricated himself from Seishiro's mind hours ago. He felt dizzy, disoriented; his knees buckled; the ache in his physical body now reached him even Within. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the mantra...

...and blinked in the first light of dawn. Hours... he'd spent hours Within. His head was incredibly heavy. His eyes were closing. No, he mustn't... Seishiro's cheek was warm against his palm, solid. Subaru blinked, saw the child's face in the man's, the tormented teen and the cheeky little boy...

Seishiro turned in his sleep and trapped Subaru's hand, pressing his stubbled cheek deeper into his palm with a contented sigh.

Subaru's heart was racing. He was so tired... Seishiro was so warm against his skin... It hurt...

~::~::~~

08:32

Seishiro woke suddenly, from one moment to the next. Somebody was lying behind him, an arm draped across his chest, fingertips tingling against his collarbone.

Someone... was hugging him. He remained utterly still.

Quiet breaths fanned against his shoulder blade.

Someone... alive. He tensed, rolled out of bed, turned and found—

Subaru, shivering, lying naked next to where Seishiro had been just a moment before, the second cover a tangled mass around his feet. The bruises and scrapes along his spine had become a colorful display overnight. Subaru had taken the brunt of yesterday's storm — in more ways than one. There was blood, smeared and dried between his legs, and a broad stripe of already black bruises across his throat, just below the finger marks remaining from the Vamachara.

Gradually, Seishiro's pulse slowed.

A sharp pain burned around his right wrist; a thin line of scab circled it where the Sakura had broken his strike. The scars on the back of his hands itched; Subaru must have lost control over his marks last night. Though the red shades around the pentagram scars on Subaru's hands worried him more: his own shielding had been lacking as well. A disconcerting thought.

With an annoyed sigh he pulled the cover up over Subaru and headed straight for the bath to scrub the stale odor of sex, sweat and blood off his skin. He knew he'd notice the smell for hours.

The soap burned in the deep scratches on his arm. This time, Subaru had fought for his life. He ground his teeth, working the foam into his hair.

Damn. It had been years since he felt like this.

~::~::~~

10:01

Subaru was lying on his belly, his face buried comfortably in the smooth cloth of a pillow when he woke. It was warm, smelling of... Seishiro. Right now, nothing hurt, but he had a strong feeling that might change when he tried to move.

The marks tingled faintly. Seishiro wasn't beside him.

Subaru turned onto his back, stubbornly ignoring the pain, and stared at the ceiling.

Seishiro.

Seishiro's mother. He shuddered.

He'd been prepared for her death by her son's hand. He hadn't been prepared for his urge to kill her himself.

He raised his hands in front of his eyes, saw dried blood under his nails...

Her son's, not hers.

He buried his face in his hands. Hands smelling of blood *again*, blood *not* his own, and Seishiro. Seishiro had snuggled his cheek into his palm, craving touch, comfort, *taking control*.

Running his hands up into his hair, Subaru stared at the ceiling. This turmoil was the reason why he wasn't supposed to have a special person. His back ached where he'd hit the wall yesterday. And lower...

He drew a deep breath and sat up to get out of bed. There was a little blood on the sheet where he'd lain, and his body protested at moving. He ignored it. A note was pinned to the other pillow: "Soak."

It seemed to be reasonable advice.

Subaru rinsed himself a second time with warm water before he poured shampoo into his palm and began working the dark amber gel into his hair. A faint scent of sandalwood filled the room. Involuntarily, he breathed deeper.

He closed the tap when the scent weakened and the last suds had found the drain. The glass lid of the tub was closed and steamed up. He removed it and winced at the pain between his legs when he climbed in. Easing himself into the hot water, he allowed his sore muscles to relax in the heat and his thoughts to wander...

"Onii-chan, don't allow her to—"

Frustrated, Subaru rested his head on the edge of the tub. He couldn't stop her... it was much too late... and again he saw Seishiro's innocent three-year-old self dissolving into dust.

"Onii-chan, don't allow her—"

"But you like it..."

There had been no tears, no crying.  
"She can take care of him."  
"If Seishiro stays as unruly as he is—"  
"—we will eliminate him in time."

Yet, it had been Seishiro who held him, Seishiro who told him that it was all right to cry over lost innocence. Now he wondered how much that comment had cost Seishiro even as one of his lies during the bet.

Come to think of it... Why had Seishiro made the bet in the first place? And what about that little game he'd witnessed between Seishiro and Imonoyama back at the mansion? Imonoyama wasn't stupid — he was one of the most intelligent people Subaru knew. Seishiro had to know that it was impossible for Imonoyama *not* to have concluded who and what Seishiro was. And yet...

If he had understood Imonoyama right, they'd been playing their game of hypothetical truths and faked lies since they were in school. A game that could turn deadly if they made a mistake that forced Seishiro to abandon pretense. But as long as they were playing, they could keep their friendship.

By playing friendship like a game, Seishiro turned it into something he knew how to handle.

By making a bet about—

"Why don't you fight back?" Seishiro had asked. A seemingly innocuous question coming directly after a physical assault that had left Subaru with broken ribs and a shattered arm.

*Competitive*, Imonoyama had called him.

"I wonder how my powers compare to yours... It appears I have won this bet... Why don't you fight back?"

Subaru sat up, almost splashing hot water over the edge of the tub. Without even recognizing it, Seishiro had *offered* to go further, in the only way he knew: competition. But Subaru had been a naive boy with an innocent concept of love back then, and unable to follow.

"Why don't you fight back?"

"But you like it..."

Subaru wondered if he'd be able to follow now. If he was able to play this new game — probably deadly — which for once wasn't about what the boy wanted but what Seishiro...

...needed?

~::~::~~

11:39

Breakfast was a silent — and late — affair for Seishiro. The case he'd terminated yesterday called for an interest in today's news, but his headache was strong enough for him to decide against the radio. The two painkillers he'd had with his morning coffee hadn't done any good. He felt as he had in his youth after somebody had tried to read him by force. But he didn't feel sick...

The Tree whispered in the back of his mind and he forcefully shut it out. He would *not* contact it about his headache. He snorted and touched the line of scab across his cheek. Definitely not.

He turned his nearly empty coffee mug in his hands, trailing a finger around its two orange penguin feet. *It should have an ice floe for a saucer*, he thought distractedly, *it could waddle across it*. He emptied the last drops of cooled coffee into the sink and refilled his mug.

Subaru came into the kitchen and eased himself onto one of the chairs without making his usual tea first. Seishiro judged his cautious, restrained movements carefully and put his mug down. It didn't look as if he could leave things as they were. He headed for his medicine cabinet.

"Here." Seishiro placed a small tube of salve on the table in front of Subaru. "Reduces the risk of infection and numbs the area."

"Why...?"

"The Vamachara covered the first, but not the second. Be careful for a few days."

"I can't." Subaru sighed, resting his elbows on the table without even looking at the breakfast set out for him. "I'm expected at the National Diet Building for an exorcism. Actually, I was supposed to do it *yesterday*." He leaned his face against his hands. "It would be irresponsible to postpone it for another day... or more."

Seishiro pulled a chair over and sat down. "The specter's that aggressive?"

"It's the government. The main house won't let me neglect this case." Subaru drew a deep breath and gathered himself up, taking the salve. "Excuse me. I've got to prepare myself."

Seishiro watched him leave the room. He noted the slight limp and the untouched food on the table. He'd have to do something about that assignment. Subaru wouldn't like that, but then... Seishiro smiled, amused. Subaru had told him to *excuse him*, hadn't he?

~::~::~~

12:02

The water hit his shoulders and flowed down his back as he rinsed himself a second and third time. Subaru forced himself not to wince when his sore muscles contracted at the cold. For the first time, he seriously wished the ritual of harae allowed the use of warm water. Startled at the thought, he bowed low in apology and, ignoring his protesting back, rinsed himself a fourth time before reciting the norito.

Finishing, he clapped his hands three times and stood, reaching for the towel he'd put on the shelf. His tumbler cluttered to the tiles.

"Do you need help?" Seishiro called, obnoxiously cheerful, from outside.

"No!" Subaru snapped, gritting his teeth as he collected the dropped tumbler from the floor. He hadn't locked the door. It wasn't as if locks could stop Seishiro anyway. So why bother? But he still kept a wary eye on the door while toweling himself. He sighed and looked thoughtfully at the small tube of salve. Seishiro's way of apologizing. Probably.

Subaru tied the sash and studied his reflection in the mirror assessingly, running his fingertips over the black marks visible on his throat well above the yukata's collar. He'd better wear a high-necked sweater today or there would be questions he did not want to answer...

"Yes, I'll be waiting."

Seishiro was speaking on the phone when Subaru returned from the bathroom. The exorcism was likely going to be tough, since the specter seemed to change shape at will. Subaru wished he could go for ceremonial robes. At least, it would spare him the tight pants. Unfortunately, a shikifuku wouldn't cover his throat and with a turtleneck underneath... his grandmother would have the rest of his hide if he appeared in such an attire at the National Diet. He opened the closet where his clothes had found a place.

"Yes, put him on the line please."

Unfolding the sweater, Subaru wondered if it weren't better to change elsewhere. He didn't want to disturb Seishiro's call — or show off his bruises.

"Deputy Ishido?"

The turtleneck fell from Subaru's hand.

"I'm calling on behalf of Sumeragi Subaru. We'd like to conduct the planned exorcism today at—" Seishiro smoothly blocked his desperate reach for the phone. "A mourning ceremony? No, I'm sorry. Our schedule didn't allow us to catch the morning news today."

Subaru straightened defiantly under the hard stare with which Seishiro assessed his condition, obviously not pleased with what he saw. "Representative Sawada? Oh my... Yes. Yes, I see. In that case an exorcism is out of the question within the next three days, because the soul might still be lingering around his favorite places."

Subaru tried to reach for the phone again. Seishiro ignored him. "No, I fear that's not possible. There's the matsuri and the purification ritual..." He mumbled something even Subaru next to him couldn't understand. "How about next week? Yes... Splendid! I'll book you for Monday, April 3rd, 10:15.... Sayonara, Ishido-san." Seishiro threw the receiver onto the hold. "How did you end up in a condition like this!?"

"You should know all about it," Subaru returned angrily. "How dare you interfere with my work!?"

"We both know that you aren't up to it. What on earth were you doing in the bath?"

"Purification. You know I require it before a job," Subaru shot back. "And I'm sure even *you* know how it's properly done!"

"The rites date back to the 8th century. Don't you think there have been certain innovations since then — like warm water for example?"

"I won't take risks when I know I haven't abstained from impurity!"

"There's a fine line between religious austerity and self-torture!"

"Yes. And I draw it somewhere else than you!" Seeing Seishiro narrow his eyes at his outburst, Subaru clamped down on his temper. "I accept impurity," he explained with forced calm. "I embrace it. Sometimes I even seek it. I shouldn't, but I do—" —*with you*. "But I cannot ignore it when it puts others in danger."

Seishiro snorted. "Impurity doesn't connect with you. Accept it."

And Subaru understood. They'd been both blinded. "*Kind and pure and honest...*" Seishiro had called him when making the bet. "*You're too kind,*" were his words at Rainbow Bridge. "*Why don't you fight back?*" Now. Or never. "I'm as pure or impure as any other human being prior purification," he said. "Don't you see that?" He reached up, touched the scratch the Sakura had left on Seishiro's cheek the night before. Seishiro immediately broke the contact. "Can't you see?" Subaru pressed quietly. "You never saw me. You were like me, you saw the boy like I saw the veterinarian, who never existed..." No, that wasn't quite right... "—who never existed *alone*."

"It's dangerous to delude yourself, Subaru-kun." There was a distinct warning in Seishiro's tone. Subaru ignored it.



"There is something of him in you," he insisted. "Your education, your curiosity—" He raised his hand to keep Seishiro from cutting in. "But you're much more, much darker than that — just like me. I'm not the innocent boy I was when you marked me as your prey, Sakurazukamori."

Seishiro arched a brow towards the still rumpled bed. "Innocent is not a word I would use for you anymore."

The familiar play for control was easy to handle. "That's part of it," Subaru concurred, cupping Seishiro's cheek, careful not to restrict his ability to move. Seishiro immediately caught his wrist in a tight grasp, but Subaru had expected as much. He brushed his thumb slowly over Seishiro's sensuous lips. "And that's good."

~::~::~~

17:46

Seishiro studied the small slip of paper warily, but found no spell attached to it. It was really just what it looked like: a small, yellow sheet stuck under the honey jar on the kitchen table. In Subaru's overly neat handwriting it said:

*~I changed the sheets. You do the laundry.~*

## Interregnum 3

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
March 31, 2000 — 18:22

White paper screens hid the electric lights indirectly illuminating the room as the last of the sun set. A tea set stood on one side, though the twelfth head of the Sumeragi wasn't inclined to offer any.

She looked thoughtfully at the three men kneeling at a respectful distance in front of her; their heads bent in apology. She'd known the moment they'd filed in that they hadn't been successful. All of them were skilled onmyoji, though they weren't as qualified as Subaru — or herself. They ought to be able to find whatever she sent them for, unless—

She tapped her fingernail on the armrest of her wheelchair. There were spells, so called 'repellants', capable of hiding something particularly from those looking for it. But surely Subaru wouldn't have...

She dismissed the men with a nod and a small move of her hand and frowned while they left. Repellants weren't strictly white onmyojutsu; in fact, if Subaru really had used one, then he'd taken his dabbling in the black arts much too far!

She sighed.

There was no point in sending another Sumeragi to Tokyo. Subaru was the most powerful onmyoji among their clan these days. She closed her hand forcefully around the armrest. If he'd gone astray...

She would have to go herself. For the boy's sake.

"Maki," she called her handmaid. "Prepare my traveling bag. We're going to Tokyo, first train tomorrow."

~::~::~~

Chuo-ku, Tokyo,  
March 31, 2000 — 21:07

Sakurazuka Romiro closed the door to his apartment behind him, locked it, and pocketed the key. He threw a frustrated glance through the elegant room. Its furniture, made of white wood, was complemented by a dark grey floor. Color was added by a pale pink sakura arrangement beneath a white washi scroll with a waka by Teika on the wall opposite the window. Romiro noted, satisfied, that the ink on the scroll was still immaculate black, meaning the place hadn't been touched since he'd left it five days ago.

He knew better than to stay at home when he sent out a tracer for Seishiro. His apartment was properly registered within the organization. Seishiro's on the other hand... It was a fact that the ditzy apartment he kept in Minato was a fake. The man seldom or never slept there; changed clothes and checked files at best. So far, none of them had been able to track down his real residence. They'd found several fake ones over the years; most notably the animal clinic in Shinjuku and the house in Taito.

Romiro hung up his coat. He himself had tried to track down Seishiro's magical garden — the one thing in a Sakurazukamori's life that was difficult to hide entirely — but the shrewd bastard just continued to use the garden of his predecessor. And lived elsewhere. That in itself wasn't how it was supposed to be.

He snorted. But it wasn't an offense serious enough for the clan to take action. None of his offenses were serious enough in their eyes. He clenched his fist. At his dark stare, the door in front of him rattled in its hinges. Romiro unlocked it with grim determination. A strong repellant spell on it made sure that no one ever noticed this door. The room on the other side...

...could hardly be explained to the general populace. He smirked, sitting down in the wide, leather-upholstered swivel-chair and rolled in front of the broad black granite table occupying the center of the room. The blood turning the ornamental carvings in the stone into magical boundaries had long dried.

The little girl had squirmed and screamed when he cut the skin for the tracer out of her back. Romiro savored the memory with a smile before turning his attention to the rectangular slab of sakura wood in the center of the blood patterned table. He frowned when he saw that large parts of the blood-soaked wood were blackened with soot. The five skin pieces he'd carefully pinned to the slab were shriveled and burned.  
*Burned.*

*Sakurazuka! Damn y—* He stopped, stared at the blood that had, soaking into the previously white wood, formed an intricate pattern still visible among the burns. This time, the hawk had not been fast enough. Concentrating, he began to read...

...and stopped, began again, stopped...

*Sumeragi. And traces of Sakurazuka. No, Sakurazuka traces in Sumeragi magic.* Romiro pushed the chair back and stared at the unmarked wall. It was known that the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi had

pentagram scars on his hands. What if they weren't just scars? What if they were real marks — the hawk's marks — and not one of his eccentric jokes, as the board had assumed back then?

He frowned. When had that report come in? 1991? 92? It didn't matter. In either case marked prey had gone free for much too long! Romiro balled his hand into a fist. If he could prove that—

—and...

"How did a letter I specifically addressed to *Sakurazuka Seishiro* end up in the Sumeragi's hands in the first place?"

~::~::~~

CLAMP Campus  
University Hospital  
March 31, 2000 — 23:37

*...feathers, edged in blood, rained down on the National Diet building, sticking to the stairs, the windows. The weak glow of the moon's vanishing sickle pulled the Kamui of the Dragons of Heaven out of the night, fleeing, black blood running down his legs and tears streaming down a face narrow from exhaustion...*

Kakyo jerked awake, tried frantically to find his bearings in the dark room. An eerie green nightlight was the only illumination left after the medical machines and monitors had been removed one after the other. It was silent now. A silence he hadn't known for years. A silence he wasn't used to, that let him hear his heart thumping, his blood rushing in his ears, his breath...

...the desolate crying in his dream.

Eyes wide, he fled into the brightly lit corridor, away from the sounds, the darkness, the dream—

—moving too fast for his muscles, weakened by years of neglect, to follow. He stumbled, falling against a hard body, was caught—struggled—

"Now, there. Keep quiet," a low voice rumbled and Kakyo looked up into a large pair of reflective black glasses above a smirking mouth. "Doesn't look like the end of the world, now, does it?"

Kakyo stared; his throat constricted; he— and then he found himself suddenly laughing. "No. *That* was totally different."

~::~::~~

A few minutes later, in the first minutes of April 1, 2000, Akechi Shigetaka M.D. looked up from his files when the door to his small office was opened without a prior knock.

"I've met your kitten already, Shige. Cute guy, but a little spooked." Saiga turned a chair around and sat astride on it, laying his arms folded onto its back. "So, why did you call me? Do you need me to fit him a set of clothes besides this awful hospital garbage?"

"Not quite," Akechi pushed his large, wire-framed glasses higher up his nose. "There's more to that 'kitten' than there seems to be and I need someone to watch it while it figures out the reality out there and how to live in it." He nodded vaguely at the window and the lights of Tokyo beyond.

Saiga was quiet for a moment. "What is he?" he asked finally. "You wouldn't call me in for a simple bodyguard job."

"Bodyguard? He needs a babysitter!" Akechi chuckled. "Seriously, though... He's a dreamseer. A good one."

Saiga whistled briefly. "There'll be folk out there looking for him."

"Yes. And he mustn't be caught." Akechi closed the file and stood. "And? Are you interested in the job?"

"As a babysitting bodyguard?" Saiga snorted. "Damn. Yes."

~::~::~~

Kabuki-cho, Shinjuku, Tokyo  
April 1, 2000 — 09:36

The twelfth head of the Sumeragi tested the walls carefully, searching for the slightest imperfection that might indicate a breach covered up later, finding none. Subaru's apartment seemed unharmed. She thought of the overflowing mailbox downstairs — mostly advertisements — and didn't feel relieved. Taking an ofuda from the deep sleeves of her traveling kimono, she straightened in her chair and focused.

"Maki, we have to go in," she decided.

The wheels of her chair crunched faintly on the bare floor of Subaru's bleak apartment. The once carefully waxed wood was covered with dust. Undisturbed dust. Hitose had been right in assuming that Subaru hadn't been home for quite a while.

She rolled over to the bedroom to look at the fax machine. A few sheets lay on its tray. Maki fetched them for her. The most recent dated back to March 17.

She sighed, remembering the case. It had been important and she'd been worried — and angry — when Subaru hadn't picked it up, hadn't even called about it. They hadn't learned that the case had not been completed until the angry client had called the main house, complaining.

It looked as if Subaru had never even received the fax. What if—?

But his later appointments had been met — much more regularly actually — so...?

She looked thoughtfully at his narrow bed. The sheets were slightly rumpled, as if someone had sat on them and hadn't bothered to straighten them afterwards. The wardrobe stood open, revealing a few scattered pieces of clothing also covered in dust and— nothing. His shikifuku was nowhere to be seen; the prayer beads were missing as well. She turned the chair, looked at the kamidana and grew cold: wrapped in rice paper, with protective ofuda and a guardian ornament surrounding Amaterasu's tablet. Pre-emptive apology for missed services.

It had been a long time since Subaru had been here, longer even since he'd slept here.

Her hands trembled.

Where was the boy?

~::~::~~

Edogawa, Tokyo  
Togakushi Shrine  
April 1, 2000 — 23:32

*The divine sword nailed his hand to the concrete. "Such a nice voice... Kamui..."*

*A whisper, the purr of a deep, familiar, forbidden voice that vibrated over his skin and down his spine. It silenced his cries, numbed him when glass shards cut through his hand and shoulder, pinning him even more firmly against the torn wall.*

*"The earth wishes for a change..."*

*Blood filled his mouth, spilled over his lips. Even breaths fanned over his skin. A wet tongue licked the sensitized spot on his throat. Teeth followed. He arched back against the shards holding his hands and leg, arched into the body leaning against him. Excruciating pain turned to— to—*

*"Fu...ma..."*

*His chin was tipped back. Brown eyes held his gaze. "A change that won't be hindered by humans." A hard body pressed him to the stone. Narrow hips pushed against his groin. The words were whispered like a caress: "For that I will kill all those who make the earth impure..."*

Kamui startled awake, sweat-soaked.

A dream. It was only a dream. A twisted retelling of events past, to which his body reacted. It wasn't the first time he dreamed that nonsense. It probably wasn't the last time, either. Angrily, he punched a fresh dent into his pillow and threw a tired glance at the cheap alarm clock whose ticking filled the otherwise silent room. 23:35; he hadn't slept more than an hour. He lay down again, trying to force himself to sleep...

*"Such a nice voice... Kamui..." the purr of a deep, familiar, forbidden voice that vibrated over his skin and down his spine, pinning him even more firmly to the floor. Even breaths fanned over his skin. A wet tongue licked the sensitized spot on his throat. Teeth followed. He arched into the body leaning against him to— to—*

*He was dreaming again... twice in one night and...*

*His chin was tipped back. Brown eyes held his gaze in the twilight. An alarm clock ticked and a hard body pressed him down. Narrow hips pushed against his groin. The words were whispered like a caress: "For that I'll make you impure..."*

*Blood dripped from the dragon claw mark onto Kamui's face, slipped between his lips, tasting of copper, of—*

*It wasn't a dream. It— A large hand was shoved into his underwear, pushed between his legs. Kamui arched back, struggled, tried to get away; a callused palm pressed painfully against his scrotum. The Twin Star smirked, pushing deeper, pushing back between his cheeks, spreading them. A long finger was forced into him; sharp nails... Kamui gasped; he felt skin tearing. Wetness—*

*"Ah, lubrication..." The pressure vanished. Fingertips, coated bright red, were held against Kamui's lips. "Want to taste it?"*

*Kamui twisted, struck—*

—bright red fingertips in front of his eyes.

—bright red fingertips buried in Fuma's flesh.

Fuma, bleeding around his fingers, his—

Not again. Kamui checked the blow, just in time.

His hand lay lightly on Fuma's chest, feeling his heart-beat. *Calm. Strong. Unharmed.*

"I see you remember what I taught you," the Twin Star purred.

He remembered. Hurting Fuma hurt too much. He'd rather—

He spread his legs, raised his knees, exposing himself. The sheets stuck wet to his skin. He—

The hard body above him trembled, stilled, then—

"Kamui. Get away from me."

"Fu...ma?"

"Get away!"

"Fuma." Kamui ran his hand over a cheek slick from blood.

"I can't hold him much longer!"

Kamui was practically thrown across the room; he slammed against the far wall. His back scraped over it as he slid down.

"Stop... making it easy!" Fuma yelled at him. It was a desperate cry. Desperate, and hateful. Blood-splattered clothes were thrown at him. "Cover yourself!"

With a choked sob, Kamui scrambled out of the room, pressing his clothes in a tangled mass against his chest.

## 09 — Hanami Frost

*Hanami season. The Tree watched its current Sakurazukamori unfold a canvas chair next to its broad trunk, followed by a cozy blanket. Seishiro took a thermos flask and a graphic novel out of his camping bag, poured himself a steaming coffee, and settled down comfortably.*

*The Tree recalled a hanami Sunday twenty years ago, when he had turned up with a ghetto blaster and cleared not only the Tree's immediate vicinity, but the area around the next three trees, too. The park department had not been amused. And a few years later, there'd been the warning about a truck load of pig dung to be spread around it, should it decide 'not to behave' while Seishiro was writing his doctoral thesis. It doubted that Seishiro would go that far — the aroma wouldn't go well with Armani — but it had preferred not to put it to the test. Seishiro was capable of surprises.*

*Seishiro. His hair was ruffled by a light breeze that also tugged at the pages of his novel, while the park was already filling with young salarymen out to claim the best hanami places for their companies. More than one strode purposefully in their direction, only to stop in his tracks when Seishiro raised his eyes from the book to glare at him. Taken. Claimed.*

*The Tree's branches rustled in amusement.*

*It was tempted to show its Sakurazukamori how wrong that notion was, how... inappropriate a view of their relation, but it abstained from touching, even from teasing him today. The events remembered the night before were still too vibrant in his mind.*

*Too bad he wouldn't let it have one of the tasty sake-seasoned morsels that would swarm the park soon in the wake of their junior employees. Idly, the Tree wondered if Yue would have permitted it at least one, once a year.*

*Laughing Yue, who'd lain in its branches, and in an Empress's bed.*

*Wary Seishiro, who'd needed its shelter so badly, and never trusted it.*

*Blossoms fluttered, desiring to touch. It had been a strange experience to protect a guardian who was de facto too young for his position at the time of succession, and the Tree wasn't yet sure it understood the way looking out for him had changed it. And now, Sei-chan was forced to lie with the enemy...*

*The Tree's branches quivered and a gust of petals fluttered down on Seishiro, his book, and—  
"Stop shedding in my coffee, will you!"*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
April 2, 2000 — 08:26

It was a quiet morning; Subaru sat in the kitchen, having green tea and toast with lime jelly for breakfast. Seishiro had, to Subaru's surprise, already been gone when he'd woken up twenty minutes ago. There was soup for him on the cooker, but he'd decided not to warm it. He remembered the last time too well. There was a reason why he always did the dishes and Seishiro the cooking. Come to think of it, the main house probably thought him on a fasting spree by now, considering the lack of food on his bills.

He bit into the toast and scanned the Sunday paper. The headlines were still filled with the eruption of Mount Usu and the evacuation of over 9000 people in its vicinity. Subaru wondered briefly which kami was responsible for Hokkaido volcanoes and if they were the same the Ainu worshiped as Kamuy...

Subaru's neck hair tingled and he quickly turned the page. A low electronic beeping announced an incoming phone call on his number. Who...? He quickly went into the bedroom to take it.

=This is deputy minister Ishido. I'd like to speak with Sumeragi Subaru-san.=

"I am on the line, Ishido-san. How may I help you?"

=Sumeragi-san?= There was relief in the voice on the other end. =I am to inform you that Premier Minister Obuchi Keizo suffered a serious stroke yesterday. We are concerned that his condition is connected with the apparition you are planning to exorcise.=

"My deep sympathy for Premier Obuchi." Subaru barely stopped himself from bowing at the phone. "May I ask if the Premier suffered the stroke at the Diet Building?"

=No, I've been told it happened at his residence over breakfast.=

"The residence is next to the Diet, right?" Subaru asked quietly.

=Yes, why?=  
"I can't say for sure yet, Deputy. The apparition was spotted as far away as the ND. Though I found no spiritual traces near the Premier's residence before, I can't say with complete certainty that it is not within the

specter's sphere of influence. I will go and look into it right now." Subaru ran a hand through his hair, already going over the preparations necessary for this emergency. "How may I reach you later?" He wrote down the set of numbers Ishido told him and ended the call. His thoughts raced. If the specter was responsible, he was responsible. He had neglected his duties.

He hurried to prepare himself.

Nagata-cho, Tokyo  
National Diet Building  
10:56 (Sunday)

It was warm for the second day of April. Subaru walked slowly up the widely curved driveway back towards the main entrance of the National Diet Building, feeling stupid in his black sweater with its neck rolled up to his ears. The sun glittered on the light stones of the building and the clean scrubbed pavement reflected its heat, making it even hotter — almost like summer. A summer he'd never expected to see...

He had spent the better part of the last hour circling the Diet Building, searching for any change in its spiritual energy, but all he found was the strong, melodic humming of its kekkai calling out to him and a few diffuse traces of the apparition he was to exorcise tomorrow. The prime minister's residence had held no spiritual signature — if he discounted the slightly disdainful vibes coming from the head security officer who'd guided him through the property.

He'd reached the top of the driveway, turned his back to the building, and looked out over the Diet Front Park, a sea of pink blossoms beyond the mostly deserted parking lot. The sakura were in full bloom and the park was already crowded with people, milling in thick throngs along its paths and around its innocent trees. Hanami season; he'd almost forgotten about it. Briefly, he wondered if Seishiro had been up and about that early because of it, but then... it wasn't as if the Sakura had seasons, was it?

The vicinity of the Diet Building itself was nearly deserted — just as he'd hoped. If he didn't need access to the underground facilities, he'd be tempted to perform the ritual now, when no representatives were around, but as things were—

At least, there was no indication that the apparition was involved in prime minister Obuchi's stroke. He left the relatively cool shadow of the building, taking the broad stairs down to street level. Leaves whispered in the meticulously pruned trees and bushes that grew on both sides of the stairs. His boots tapped faintly on the pale stones and—

A choked sound stopped him. He tensed, listened — then he quickly took the last steps down and crossed into the shadows under the trees, his fingers already closing around an ofuda in his coat pocket. If there was a physical manifestation now—

He blinked in the deep shadow among the greenery. Neat stone casings framed the tree beds. On the one deepest in the shadows, a youth in a school uniform that had seen better days sat curled in on himself on the cold stones. He was resting his head on his drawn up knees with his arms slung around them. A few scattered sakura petals stuck in his scruffy dark brown hair—

"Kamui?"

The head flew up. Wide eyes stared at him in panic, and an odd part of Subaru's mind reminded him that Kamui had nothing of a Kamuy about him, though technically he wielded most of the power the Ainu ascribed to their gods.

"Subaru." The boy slumped back into his previous posture.

He let go of the ofuda. "Why are you—?"

There was a defensive line around Kamui's mouth that he remembered all too well, and the boy radiated distress. Something was wrong, but surely the apparition wasn't strong enough to force Kamui—

"You weren't called, were you?" Subaru asked.

"Called? Not that I know of." Kamui shrugged. "It's a nice day. Sunny."

"Sunny, yes." *And you are sitting in the shadow.* "But why are you here?"

"What about you, what are you doing here?" Kamui returned.

"There's a ghost haunting the Diet. I've come to make sure it doesn't pose a threat until I can exorcise it tomorrow."

"Working on a hanami Sunday." Kamui drew a face. "That sucks."

Subaru shrugged. "It's not as if I set much store by sakura blossoms."

Kamui gave him a wry smile. "Right."

Wind ruffled the trees reaching up above the driveway. A wave of half-withered petals was blown against Kamui's legs and Subaru's boots: palest pink tinged with brown. Kamui didn't move.

"Mind if I sit as well?" Subaru asked. Kamui shrugged and he took a seat next to him on the stone encasing. A pigeon cooed, likely tripping around its mate somewhere on the driveway. It was cool here. The

sun hadn't reached this spot yet and the cold of the stones was creeping through his coat and pants. How long had Kamui been sitting here? Concerned, Subaru threw a brief glance at him. Kamui was staring blindly ahead. He looked pale; and a summer school uniform was thinner than what Subaru himself was wearing.

"How about we go into the sun?"

"I'm okay here." Kamui didn't even raise his chin from his knees when he answered.

"But I'm cold." Subaru shivered demonstrably.

"Oh. Right." Kamui clambered unusually stiff to his feet. Was he that chilled through or—?

"Kamui?" Subaru asked quietly. "Are you hurt?"

"The Twin Star got me in the leg yesterday." Kamui shrugged. "It's nothing."

He was a little too nonchalant for Subaru to buy it. "Is it bad?"

"Just a stab. I've had worse last year."

"Stab wounds can be tricky." Subaru worried. "If it gets infected—"

"I'm a Kamui, remember? It's not as if destiny will let me off the hook that easily."

"You shouldn't rely on that. What if—?"

Kamui huffed. "And? What would it change?" Stalking into the sunlight, his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets, he prattled on. "Look, I'm just here because I needed a break from it all; and Fuma's sleeping in today, so there's no reason to hang around the shrine all day. I didn't expect to run into any of the others."

*Others.* Subaru said nothing. Kamui raised his shoulders against the breeze. The collar gaped briefly and Subaru spotted bare skin and finger-shaped black bruises underneath. "How long have you been here?" he asked, forcing himself to remain casual.

"Don't know." Another shrug. "A few hours. Why?"

"You look pretty frozen. How about warm tea at my place?"

"Your place? I don't think—"

"At least there the seats have cushions." Subaru tried to joke, but Kamui seemed unconvinced. "And we could talk about what happened since January."

"Talk?" Kamui frowned.

Subaru gave him a wry smile. "I'm sorry that I haven't been in touch more."

"Yeah, me too."

~::~::~~

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
11:08

*...Look at the fat one, Sei-chan... the Tree complained. ...he cheated on his wife with his secretary and on his secretary with the office girl last week and...*

"Adultery is still not punishable by death," Seishiro commented dryly, turning another page. "Fat, drunk, or not." He studied the stark black-and-white drawings on the next double page of his book<sup>21</sup> closely. "Fools. Even in 1880s London they ought to have known that a distorted pentagram has no power whatsoever. No wonder they never got a firm hold of the Ripper."

*...Maybe he was a professional?...*

"Not of the Arts. Even Norrell could have told them as much. And 1886 was within Reed's time."

*...To quote a certain youth: 'Clow Reed was a sick old fuck'....*

Seishiro snorted.

The Tree's upper branches swayed in a spirit breeze, creating the illusion of a deep-felt sigh. *...Why did the cute kid have to grow up into an uptight boring adult?...*

Seishiro ignored it and had the partying lawyers in his illusion break into raucous laughter, thinking sullenly that he could certainly do *without* hanami, when every single one of Tokyo's less-than-law-abiding managers seemed keen on offering himself to the Sakura on a silver platter. He threw a contemptuous glance over the rim of his glasses at the hanami parties that covered every free spot in the park. *Make that blue plastic planes*, he corrected sourly, returning his attention to his illusion of lawyers. He'd taken extra care to give the section chief a striking resemblance to Romiro. More precisely, a fat, drunk, and overall badly behaved Romiro.

He turned a page and continued to read, taking a sip from his cooled coffee. He choked, spat out and glared up the Tree. "What did I say about shedding in my coffee?"

*...I thought you needed the nourishment... the Tree replied smugly. ...you're too thin. And recently you have such surprisingly strenuous leisure activities...*

---

21 The graphic novel Seishiro reads at hanami is "From Hell", written by Alan Moore and drawn by Dave Gibbons, collected edition published in November 1999. It tells the story of Jack the Ripper in stark black and white pictures, based on meticulously researched sources. [<http://archive.salon.com/books/feature/1999/10/26/moore/index.html>]



Seishiro decided that the illusion of Romiro was going to barf on the Tree's roots once he finished his chapter.

~::~::~~

11:12

Exit 1 of the Kokkai-gijido-mae station was a stylish glass-and-steel construction just next to the south entrance of the National Diet Building. "This kind of building gives me the creeps," Kamui said, throwing a glance at the panes of the roof. "I always see the glass shatter and the shards cutting everyone up."

Subaru nodded. "Me, too." They'd reached the ticket machines. "Do you have a season ticket?"

As an answer, Kamui produced a grimy card from his pocket.

After retrieving his own ticket, Subaru headed straight for the escalators.

"Subaru?" Kamui called after him. "The train to Shinjuku is on the other—"

Subaru didn't stop. "I know. I moved house."

A train was just entering the station when they reached the platform for the Marunouchi line towards Tokyo Station. Subaru took a seat but Kamui, despite being slightly out of breath, remained standing. The lights of the station flicked past and disappeared in the darkness of the tunnel behind them as the train accelerated.

"Why did you move?" Kamui asked after a moment, filled with the rhythmic sound of the wheels on the tracks.

Subaru sighed. This probably wasn't his brightest idea, but he was out of options. He hadn't been in his apartment for weeks; and couldn't remember if he had restacked the first aid kit at all. On the other hand, there certainly was one in—

An elbow nudged him.

"You spaced out," Kamui told him.

"I'm sorry." Subaru sighed. "There were too many spirits in Shinjuku. I couldn't rest any more." At least it wasn't a complete lie, though the people who had died when the Shinjuku highrises fell had nothing to do with it.

"So where are we going now?"

"Sakuragi. We've got to get onto the Yamanote at Tokyo Station."

Kamui drew a face. "Isn't Sakuragi boring after Shinjuku?"

*You wouldn't say that if you knew with whom I live there.* Subaru shrugged. "After last year, 'boring' has a certain appeal for me."

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,

11:56

Subaru kept an eye on Kamui while they slowly made their way up from Uguisudani Station. Normally, it was about fifteen minutes from the station to Seishiro's house, but now it took them over twenty, although Kamui trudged doggedly on. The boy refused to accept any help; had made it abundantly clear when they got off the train at Tokyo Station and Subaru had offered his hand as Kamui stumbled and nearly fell. Subaru hadn't asked again, though he wished more and more that he'd insisted on Kamui seeing a doctor before they went out to Sakuragi. Kamui seemed to be limping, and trying to hide it whenever he thought Subaru was looking.

"Kamui—" he began, when the youth stopped at the mouth of their small back alley, supporting himself with a hand against Yoshino's white-washed wall, breathing hard.

"I'm fine, Subaru. Don't worry," Kamui said through clenched teeth. "I just didn't... expect you to live... so far from the station."

"It's not far anymore," Subaru offered quietly.

"You said that at the station," Kamui huffed and pushed himself off the wall. "It's on the other side of this mountain, right?"

"It's the next house."

Kamui blinked. "You live... *here*?"

Subaru nodded. "Come." He headed on. Yoshi's large red-tabbied shape, lying in the midday sun in front of the gate, gave hope that he could keep a certain aspect of his living arrangement from Kamui. Certainly, the cat would have wriggled in otherwise. Subaru fished for the keys in his pocket. Their faint jingling made Yoshi rise and weave leisurely around his legs, leaving the usual red-golden traces on his black pants. Subaru entered the key into the lock and scoped the cat up.

Kamui stared at the pale yellow house on the other side of the forbidding steel gate and the rusty, pentacle-shaped wall ornament mounted next to it, before giving the cat a suspicious glance. "Yours?"

"Not really." Subaru stroked the cat under the chin and pushed open the gate.

~::~::~~

Ueno Park, Tokyo,  
12:02

...*Sei-chan*... The Tree's branches stilled. ...*Your wards are being breached. A Kamui is entering your house...*

He tensed. "Which one?"

...*Heaven. Your 'pet' allowed him in...*

He queried his marks briefly and had an impression of Subaru hanging up coats. Then he concentrated on his wards. The dissonance was still low. Probably, because Subaru had a valid key to the house and had asked the boy in, but still—

The spiritual energy of agitated warriors brushed along his personal shields, telling of intrusion, of the enemy, of damage to their ranks. The ghosts of samurai weren't easily spooked. Tendrils of the Sakura were woven into the structure to support and guard it. They increased their reach now, shoots becoming twigs, even branches to add strength to the fabric. It would hold...

...for the time being. Seishiro extricated himself from it, getting up, leaving coffee and book abandoned on the canvas chair. He'd have to maintain the illusion from afar. Concentrating, he grimly forced his path through the partying people.

It took him nearly fifteen minutes to leave the park. Once out, he increased his speed, until he was almost running. It was roughly two kilometers between the Sakura and his house. The ghosts guarding his wards kept him informed about what went on inside. Using their power to mask his approach, he avoided querying his marks. A query was hard to miss; a mere approach however...

...he hadn't taught Subaru that. Yet. Maybe he never would.

The whispering dead told him of his prey sitting in the kitchen, sang of poured tea, concerned talk, a spiritual signature disturbed by an injury not quite what it was said to be.

Seishiro sorted through it all while he slowly walked the last meters towards his gate, safely hidden in the shadow of the high garden wall. He wove the illusion carefully; slipped it cautiously, thread by thread, detail by detail into the minds of the two people sitting at his kitchen table over cooling cups of green tea — the cheap one for everyday use — before he dared open the gate.

He spotted Subaru through the kitchen window, watched him stiffen and throw a wary glance towards the gate, right at him, through him, seeing... the glitter of sunlight on the steel of the closed gate, the intricate pattern of its shadow on the concrete. Grass from his neglected garden touched the left corner. A few blades stuck in the hinge...

Seishiro waited, meeting Subaru's stare unbeknownst to his prey, one on one. Illusions were an art all of its own, and he excelled in it, having practiced it against other practitioners, at times to save his life.

In the kitchen, Subaru frowned and slowly turned his attention back inside, only to throw a fast, final look in the end. *Nice ploy, but I'm better than that!* Seishiro kept the illusion intact until he reached the door. Suppressing the sound when opening it was easy—

~::~::~~

"Is something wrong?" Kamui asked inside.

"Nothing." Subaru shook his head. The midday sun created a rapidly shrinking puddle of light on the kitchen table. It would be gone soon, when the sun moved across the house. *"I've got a morning kitchen,"* Seishiro had said once, and, though odd, Subaru admitted that it was a fitting description. Morning — rising sun, fresh air, bright colors and promises which might or might not be kept by the day. He sipped at his cooled green tea and wondered what Kamui thought of it. The room wasn't like him — at least not like the 'him' he'd been over the last nine years, the 'him' Kamui was familiar with...

...and yet, somehow he had begun to fit in here. A startling realization, now that he'd spent the better part of half an hour sitting across from the stubborn Dragon of Heaven, nursing his tea and trying to get the truth out of him. At least, Kamui had stopped looking like death warmed over; not that sick-on-hold was much of an improvement.

Subaru sipped from his tea again and put the cup down. "I'm worried. I saw too many people die last year, too many spirits begging for release to ever help them all on. And now all those who died after the fight at Rainbow Bridge are alive." He shook his head. "I fear they'll be dead again if something happens to you. Or to me. Or to—" He stopped short of saying 'Seishiro' and reached for the cup again, not to drink from it, but to have something in his hands.

Kamui reached across the table, putting his hand over Subaru's on the cup. "Don't worry." His touch felt cold on Subaru's skin. "I told you I can deal with the Twin Star. I—"

"May I ask what's going on here?" Seishiro interrupted from the kitchen door, leaning deceptively at ease against the frame.

"You!" Kamui leaped to his feet, stumbled, his chair scraping loudly across the kitchen tiles.

"Kamui, don't." Subaru intervened quickly, also rising. "It's not like you think."

"Tsk." Seishiro snorted, sauntering into the room. "It's exactly like he thinks. Don't bother with denial. So what is he doing here — aside from mistreating my furniture?"

Kamui stopped dead at Seishiro's last statement... seemed rattled by it.

"He's my guest," Subaru declared. "I apologize for not asking you beforehand, but having tea was... a kind of spontaneous decision."

"Spontaneous, yes?" Seishiro arched a brow at the boy and Kamui took a step back. Energy crackled. Dissonance grated through the soothing song of the dead guarding the house.

"Kamui, please—"

"Subaru-kun, your 'guest' is bleeding on *my* kitchen floor." Seishiro pointed accusingly at two small, crimson-colored droplets.

"Wh—!?" Kamui flared. "Clean your glasses! I'm not—" A third droplet hit the tiles next to his foot.

This was way more serious than Subaru had already suspected. "Let me see the wound," he demanded.

"No." Kamui took a shaky step back. "It's just the leg that's—"

"—dripping on my floor," Seishiro interrupted, hands stuffed casually in his pant pockets. "And stop lying. You aren't good at it. It's not your *leg* that was stabbed."

"That's none of your business. I'm here with Subaru and—"

"If he puts you in my kitchen to die after being raped, it is."

"Fuck. It was consensual. I—"

Subaru froze. "*I'll play with you,*" the Twin Star had promised once. His thoughts raced. "You're too young to give consent."

"Age of consent in Japan is thirteen!" Kamui spat.

*But consensual sex doesn't leave you half-dressed and half-frozen on a deserted parking lot.* Kamui shouldn't have to deal with Seishiro of all people in a condition like this. He—

"Prefectural law supersedes national law and the prefecture of Tokyo set the age of consent at *seventeen*," Seishiro stated coldly into Subaru's thoughts. "Which makes you perfect jailbait, Kamui-kun, no matter what you said."<sup>22</sup>

"You didn't care about that with Subaru either!"

"The law draws a precise line between *flirting* and *touching*. Ask him whether or not I crossed it back then." Subaru caught a short, sharp glance from Seishiro. He gave a small nod behind Kamui's back. The boy needed treatment. Urgently. If— "So you will have Nokoru's physician treat you, or I'll take that phone and give Metropolitan Police a call about statutory rape. Your decision."

"They can't deal with the Twin Star. Even you can't be that stupid."

"Not my problem."

"But Subaru would—"

"Not my problem. Don't make me repeat myself," Seishiro warned him. "I'm waiting."

Subaru wisely kept silent. More blood dripped to the floor. "Nokoru," Kamui said finally to his relief.

"Good choice." Seishiro vanished through the open kitchen door. A moment later, his agitated voice sounded over the corridor. "Nokoru? Seishiro. Kamui's here with me and— Seal. We need a physician, rectal emergency kit, and no questions. — Not me. The Twin Star."

Kamui shivered. "It's not what he thinks—" he said tiredly, propping himself against the kitchen counter. "I should leave. I—"

"You're hurt," Subaru said softly. "Please allow yourself to be treated." He sighed inwardly at the dark, betrayed look the boy gave him. "Mono-kun wouldn't want you to die, would he?" Kamui shrugged.

"—Yes, my place!" The bang of a phone being thrown onto the cradle followed.

"How long?" Subaru asked when Seishiro returned.

"Fifteen minutes. Tokyo University's got a helipad."

23:17

Kamui was sleeping on the couch Subaru had used on his first night in Seishiro's house as well. The doctor had stayed until Kamui's sedation turned into normal sleep. Considering the injuries Akechi had confirmed to

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22 For more information about the age of consent in Japan see <http://legal.3yen.com/2005-07-27/is-the-age-of-consent-in-japan-really-13/>

him, Subaru would have preferred to put the boy in a bed, but there was a limit to what Seishiro would put up with. Bringing Kamui here at all was bad enough; lending out Seishiro's bed—

Subaru rested his head against his hand, staring out of the kitchen window into the dark garden. New moon was in three days and they were high up on Ueno hill with the tall wall shielding the garden from the city lights. All he could really see was the reflection of his tired face in the pane above the fruits basket.

"You know that he can't stay here." Seishiro pulled out the second chair and sat down opposite him.

Subaru nodded silently. "Just tonight. Please." *He needs a place to rest where he can feel safe, even if it's just for a few hours.* "He has to stand up to the Twin Star."

Seishiro said nothing. A brief glance told Subaru that Seishiro was staring out into the night like he himself had done just a moment ago, then:

"The wards are hiding him — for the time being, but they are weakened by his presence. If he stays, the Twin Star will find this place."

"I'm surprised he hasn't found it already."

Seishiro gave him a wry smile. "Why do you think I bought a house almost *inside* the Yanaka cemetery? The Kamui represent divinity."

"The realm of Death is separate. Though Izanagi returned from it, he never ruled it and neither do his children." Subaru blinked. "Your wards are—"

"—not part of the Kamui's sphere of influence."

"You planned all this long before 1999 started, didn't you?"

"No. I just value my priv—" A violent flash and deafening thunder interrupted him; the following silence was ended by the patter of heavy rain against the kitchen window. More flashes cast the nightly garden in eerie black and white images, blurred by the water streaming down the pane. "Looks like I don't have to sit in the park tomorrow," Seishiro commented wryly. "Come to bed."

"With Kamui in the living room?" Subaru shook his head. "I think not."

"I won't lose sleep over your marks because of that brat—" The scars on Subaru's hand flickered briefly. "—and neither will you."

April 3, 2000 — 06:09

Subaru woke slowly, wrapped in a cocoon of warmth, a heart beating steadily under his cheek. He was snuggled against Seishiro, their legs entangled. Apparently, his marks had sought contact as close as possible. Or was that how they always slept and he just didn't know because Seishiro was usually up and about when he woke up? A disconcerting thought and—

Something hot touched his hip. Realizing what it was, he tried to move away to avoid further discomfort for Seishiro, only to have his left hand deftly caught and pressed around the taut flesh.

"Payment due," Seishiro grunted, moving it firmly up and down—

Heat flowed into Subaru's face. The heartbeat under his cheek quickened; the previously quiet breaths became rougher. His own arousal grew, his erection lying hot against Seishiro's skin. The forced movement became faster, rougher—

Seishiro next to him tensed, spasmed. Subaru's hand was suddenly slick and wet. Languorously, Seishiro ran Subaru's palm over the now soft flesh again before he released him with a contented sigh and sat up.

Subaru caught his wrist. "Don't forget my change," he demanded hoarsely, noting satisfied the brief flicker of surprise in Seishiro's eyes.

Amused laughter followed. "What if I'm out of small coin?"

"You can pay in kind."

"Didn't they teach you to keep financial matters in your own hands?"

"Yes," Subaru said, "but in this case it would be the wrong hand."

"What's wrong with this one?" Seishiro caught Subaru's hand again, pressed the slick fingers against Subaru's straining groin, making him squirm.

Subaru wasn't deterred. "It belongs to the wrong person," he insisted and almost cried out when Seishiro's fingers finally closed around him.

"With Kamui-chan in the living room?" Seishiro inquired, staying maliciously still.

"Yes..." Subaru turned himself into the touch, biting his lips to keep silent. "...please."

"What if I write another spell on you?"

"I'll—" Subaru's breath caught in his throat at the first, teasing stroke. "—take that risk."

~::~::~~

It was cool outside when Seishiro went to retrieve the morning paper two hours later. Last night's thunderstorm had cleared the air and left behind that fresh, almost ozonic quality that never lasted long after

sunrise in a metropolis. Water droplets still hung from every surface. The paper was soaked where it stuck between the bars of the gate.

It had taken time to extricate himself from the bed after his prey cried out in climax despite all his efforts to stay quiet, lips bitten, slender hands clawed into the twisted sheet. Seishiro allowed himself a smirk and pulled the paper out of the gate, unrolled it and skimmed the headlines. They were unspectacular, making him wonder for how long the ruling LDP would be able to hide the real condition of the prime minister. The radio news had held nothing, either. He shrugged. If they waited too long, there would be some fresh files in his "In" folder for sure.

A purr came from the other side of the gate. Looking over the edge of the paper, Seishiro met a pair of large golden eyes looking expectantly up at him. "Go home," he told the cat. Yoshi ignored him and rubbed his bulky form against the gate; not long and the cat would try to wriggle through it, get stuck as usual and— Seishiro sighed. The bars seemed to vibrate from the purring. "Oh, whatever." He pushed open the gate and drew a face at forty pounds of not-quite-dry cat weaving around his legs.

He folded the paper and returned to the house, taking the occasional large step over the cat. There was miso soup and rice simmering on the stove. Maybe he'd spice up his breakfast with toast and coffee. Seishiro slipped out of his shoes. The clanging of pot lids had him hurry up the stairs towards the kitchen. It wouldn't do to let the soup bur—

He stopped. Kamui. Dipping a spoon into his soup.

"Whoever tastes my cooking behind my back risks that I have him eat Subaru's," Seishiro warned, tossing the paper onto the table.

Kamui jerked away. "I'd prefer that," he stated defiantly, while Seishiro checked on his soup.

"No, Kamui. You wouldn't." Subaru said from the door, looking delicious with his disheveled hair, the shirt unbuttoned at the collar. "Believe me."

Kamui stared at him, wide-eyed. "You—"

"Rice or toast?" Seishiro asked cheerfully. "Tea water should be about ready."

"Thank you. Toast, please." Subaru opened one of the cupboards and frowned. "Where are the cups?"

"Dishwasher? I didn't clear it out yet."

"My treat then," Subaru took a kitchen towel and began sorting cups and dishes into the boards. The glass tea set was put straight onto the table. "Do you take rice or toast with your soup, Kamui?" he asked, while wiping down the bowl decorated with cartoon penguins holding up a bright red banner that asked 'Wanna know what's under the tailcoat?'

"He gets rice," Seishiro declared, putting his coffee mug opposite Subaru's tea cup on the second place set. "There's enough of that." He put the warmed bowl in the center of the table.

After a moment, Kamui fetched himself the kitchen stool, dropping the stack of old papers on it onto the ground with a loud thud. Seishiro pointedly ignored him.

"You can have my chair, Kamui," Subaru said. "I'm going to take the stool."

Seishiro divided the soup into three bowls and sat. "I suggest you get yourself the desk chair. At least, you can look *onto* the table then."

"Do you begrudge me the view?" Subaru retaliated on his way out. "Or are you afraid I'll see something I haven't seen before?"

"Well." Seishiro leaned back. "We're in the same trade..."

"What did you do to him!?" Kamui hissed the moment Subaru was safely out the door, still laughing faintly. "Those bruises—"

"I should think that's obvious." Seishiro buttered his toast.

"If you hurt him again," Kamui stated, "I'll kill you!"

"You can try." Seishiro shrugged. "And you might end existence if you do."

"And I just might not care, as long as I stop you!"

"As effectively as you stop the Twin Star?" Seishiro bit into his toast, chewing calmly. "You're obviously too much of a wimp to keep the Dragon of Earth at arm's length even for your own sake." He sipped from his coffee. "I bet your beloved is all joy that you leave the responsibility for controlling the Twin Star to him."

"I—" Kamui opened his mouth for a reply, then shut it, saying nothing when Subaru returned with the chair.

"When do you leave for your exorcism?" Seishiro asked.

Subaru put the chair down in front of the table and sat. "I just gave Ishido-san a call, telling him that I can't possibly exorcise the apparition until the prime minister's condition has stabilized."

"One way or the other," Seishiro commented. "I guess, Ishido wasn't too happy about it."

"No," Subaru admitted with a sigh, reaching for his soup. "It's the second delay after all."

"It's not your fault if Diet members keep dropping like flies."

Subaru gave him a dark look. "It doesn't matter. We have to bring Kamui back and—"

"We?" Seishiro tossed his napkin onto the table and stood. "He left there on his own, and for all I care that's the way he returns!"

"You—"

"It's alright, Subaru," Kamui said quietly. "I'll be fine. Just show me the way to the station. I didn't pay attention yesterday."

~::~::~~

In spite of the night's thunderstorm and the fresh morning, it didn't turn out to be a clear day. Low-hanging clouds chased over the sky, threatening more rain. A stiff breeze batted Subaru's coat against his legs and he tied the belt more firmly as he and Kamui headed down the narrow streets towards Uguisudani station. "Are you really all right with this? We can try to find an alternative, at least for a while, until you recovered some more and—"

"No." Kamui shook his head. "I have to go back. I need to help Fuma... I haven't really been doing that," he muttered to himself, then straightened determinedly, facing Subaru. "But you shouldn't go back to *him*. Your throat looks like he nearly throttled you and—"

"That's not Seishiro's fault." *Those were caused by a dead woman's perversity*, Subaru thought grimly. "My jobs can be rather dangerous, sometimes," he added with a reassuring smile.

"I heard you last night." Kamui averted his eyes. "It's not fair that for the fate of the world, you have to let him molest you."

"The fate of the world has nothing whatsoever to do with it."

"You say that only so that I don't feel bad about it. I couldn't decide and now you have to—" Kamui clenched his fists helplessly. "It's not fair."

"Kamui. Molestation is when something you don't want is being done to you against your will." Subaru stopped at the Kototoi-dori and waited for a gap in the traffic to cross over. "Seishiro is not molesting me." He threw a long look back along the way they'd come, then went to the ticket machines and bought a ticket for himself.

Kamui looked at him wide-eyed. "Why—" he began.

"I'm accompanying you," Subaru said firmly. "We have to remind the Twin Star that the Dao isn't as neutral as he thinks."

The late morning hours were comparatively quiet on the trains heading towards the suburbs and they easily obtained seats. According to Kamui, they would have to change trains twice. The closest station to the shrine was Shinozaki on the Toei line in Edogawa. Edogawa, having been spared most of 1999's turmoil, wasn't an area where Subaru worked often. He prayed that wouldn't change now.

Kamui was silent most of the time, but after they changed trains the second time, he became fidgety. Finally, he burst out, "Look, can you just get out at the next stop and go back? I don't want you near the Twin Star! He'll attack you and I don't want you to get even more hurt. You're all alone and—"

"Don't worry," Subaru reassured him calmly. "Seishiro will come."

"Why— why would he do that? He's the Sakurazukamori! You can't rely on him, he—"

Subaru took his hand out of his coat pocket and showed him the faintly glowing mark on its back. "He doesn't have a choice," was all he said before leaning back into his seat and staring out the window again. Outside, the train crossed the Arakawa River, entering Edogawa.

The marks tingled. Seishiro was tracking him already. Subaru tried to judge the distance between them, but he wasn't sure about the results. It was one of the things they hadn't specifically trained. Seishiro focused on teaching him to live with marks, not to use them—

—maybe exactly for a reason like this. Subaru knew he would have to pay for forcing Seishiro like this — with his body and probably with a piece of his soul; but there was no reason to tell Kamui that he was using their mutual oaths, straining his own oath to the limit, for his sake. There'd been a fatalistic streak in Kamui's behavior that Subaru just couldn't ignore. He wasn't likely to fight the Twin Star effectively on his own behalf, but if he had something — someone — to protect...

Edogawa-ku, Tokyo

11:48

Togakushi was the shrine of a calm neighborhood, where the full force of urbanization hadn't struck yet. The shrine itself consisted of two buildings surrounded by old, well-tended trees around a yard that showed signs of neglect; neglect somebody was obviously working hard to rectify.

Barely large enough to warrant a kannushi of its own, the shrine was clearly still held in high regard by the people of the area. Countless ema were tied to a board beneath the tallest tree. The twigs of two small pines, growing near the far fence, had rejected omikuji tied around them. Instinctively, Subaru checked the wards

and found them well-set and in order. It told him a lot about the effort Mono Fuma put into fulfilling his role as his father's successor and providing a normal life for Kamui.

He focused on his marks again, felt their effects diminishing. Soon.

In front of him, Kamui pushed open the gate. Small bells, tied to the top-most bar, jingled. "Fuma?"

~::~::~~

Seishiro felt the sudden tension in the scars on his hands when he sorted his car into the exit traffic of Expressway No. 7 at Yagochi. The Tree whispered in the back of his mind, reminding him that, technically, he'd have to eliminate Subaru now, for endangering the realm.

*Unfortunately, that would also endanger the realm and I'd have to eliminate myself, too,* Seishiro retorted grimly.

*...Then teach him...* The Tree seemed to share his mood. *...And hurry...*

Not that he had that many options against the Twin Star. Illusions worked... but on a Kamui, only to a limited degree. As long as he could keep them ignorant of the illusion, it worked well, but once they realized... Illusions were his own magic. And a Kamui's power exceeded his. He wasn't keen on a repetition of the Final Battle. The Dao had already shown inconvenient side-effects.

Another flash of heat washed over his hands; the marks were becoming painful. No more time for an elegant solution. He floored the pedal—

—and stopped right in front of the small shrine. One of the locations he'd examined last year, once he'd known he'd have to stand against the Kamui. The area hadn't improved much since then. The gate still stood open, small bells jingling from time to time in the strengthening wind. A chime dangled on the engawa, but the police seals were gone. The door beyond it stood open, revealing a comparatively bare living room. The scent of fresh paint hung in the air. Paint and...

Burning paper. Torn fuda littered the floor in the next room. The sizzle of a banning field about to collapse; Seishiro wrapped himself carefully into an illusion before he entered that room. Subaru was holding his position in front of Kamui, who was struggling back to his feet, blood from a gash above his left eye streaming down his face.

Apparently, the Twin Star didn't like unexpected guests, either, and he was less gentlemanly about it than Seishiro himself. Subaru wouldn't be able to hold out much longer. Seishiro took the fuda from his sleeve, prepared to weave his power into Subaru's. If he added the illusion of the Dao around it, they might just—

The banning field flickered. The Twin Star forced a hand through, reached for Subaru's throat—

Seishiro charged the fuda—

"No!" Kamui leaped between them, shielding Subaru. *Interesting.*

"You want to play, too?" The Twin Star smirked, "but I'm busy with your fr—"

The slap reverberated through the room. Kamui's left hand flickered with power. "No," he repeated. "No. You won't hurt my friend. No. You won't hurt me. No... I won't leave Fuma on his own with you any longer!" He breathed in heavy gasps. Blood that had poured from the slashes of the dragon claws in the Twin Star's face stained his hand. "No."

The Twin Star staggered, blinked, bleeding gashes healed to pale silvery scars. "Kamui... no, I—" Mono Fuma took a step back, and another. His back connected with the wall and he slid down it, dangling his hands between his knees in defeat. "Gods, no." He shivered. "I... I can't..." He buried his face in his hands, shaking.

Kamui went to him, kned down beside him. "Fuma?" Behind him, Subaru drooped out of his fighting stance, supporting himself with his hands on his thighs, breathing hard.

Seishiro slowly withdrew his magic from his fuda and stepped out of the illusion. "I see you've finally figured things out to some degree," he said nonchalantly to Kamui. "Congratulations."

Three heads turned to him. For an instance a murderous glitter flickered in one of them. Kamui's hand squeezed Fuma's and it slowly died. "Get lost," he growled.

Seishiro ignored him, putting his hand onto Subaru's shoulder.

"You're late," Subaru panted, straightening slowly under his touch.

"You're dead," Seishiro returned under his breath. Aloud he said, "Complain to the Metropolitan Expressway Company. No. 7 doesn't have enough exits out here."

Subaru ducked away from his hold. "Kamui? Will you be all right on your own?"

"Yes." Kamui nodded without turning his attention from Fuma. "Thank you. And Subaru..." He actually threw a glance back, *be careful.*

Seishiro snorted, nodding at the door behind him. "Out front. The blue Aristo."

~::~::~~

"Out front. The blue Aristo."

Subaru hadn't even known Seishiro owned a car these days. He'd certainly never seen the elegant dark-blue sedan near the house and—

"Get in," Seishiro commanded and Subaru climbed into the passenger seat. "Seat belt." When Subaru didn't react immediately, he repeated, annoyed, "Fasten your seat belt." Seishiro started the motor the moment Subaru's belt clicked; laying his arm onto the back of the front seat, he backed out of the yard, turned, and slid into the slowly increasing afternoon traffic.

"I couldn't let Kamui go back on his own." Subaru said once they were safely on the Expressway. "Nobody should have to deal with something like that alone. *Nobody.*"

Seishiro said nothing. He moved the car into the fast lane and kept to the maximum speed of 100 km/h. Exactly. The needle didn't so much as twitch. They took the exit in Chuo-ku, not Ueno, coming through several, more and more ramshackle streets until Seishiro slotted the car into one of the rare parking spaces and got out wordlessly. Subaru followed. The small tea shop which Seishiro entered without looking back didn't look impressive. A small house with a bland post-war facade.

The inside however...

Wooden shelves, tinged red with age, lined the walls floor to ceiling, holding countless porcelain tea containers of all sorts and flavors. Their aromas filled the room, mingled with the honey polish of the wood and a small cinnamon incense urn on the counter that took up all of the shop's back wall, except for a narrow door to the right.

Seishiro greeted the tiny old woman behind the counter with a polite bow. "We'd like to have tea, Kurisu-san. Sakura for my guest."

"And for yourself, Sakurazuka-san?" she asked.

"Wuyi Souchong. Strong."

The woman blinked briefly, as if surprised about the order, then bowed and began to prepare the tea.

"May we have it in the garden?"

The shop keeper smiled. "It's early in the year for such a request. There's not much to see now."

"You're joking, Kurisu-san. Your garden is impressive any time of the year."

"Charmer," she laughed. "Of course you may use it. I'll bring your tea in a minute."

Seishiro pushed against the narrow door next to the counter and held it open for him. Subaru found himself in a corridor that seemed to belong to the family's quarters.

"Back door." Seishiro ordered briskly, pushing him towards a door that had seen better days. Its paint was peeling and its key was rusty. The lock itself didn't look as if it could be opened any longer, but the door wasn't locked anyway and—

Subaru stopped dead, finding himself in a courtyard less than five meters across, between... walls of green. Mosses and ferns covered the walls rising up to the roofs of the adjacent houses, fronds uncurling in the warmth of spring. Water dripped down their cascades of leaves, to be collected in a small koi pond made of old wine barrels. Two metal chairs stood next to a narrow table. Dew hung on them in the twilight between the houses. The green walls had no windows...

Subaru blinked.

Kurisu brought the tea on a cheap bamboo tray, put it on the delicate table and left without a word, closing the door behind her.

Silence. Tranquility. In the heart of Tokyo.

The dripping of water on evergreen leaves.

A koi splashed.

A smoky bitter tang pervaded the leafy scents of the wet garden. Seishiro was pouring his tea, breathing it in, sipping slowly. The scent was strong, sharp. Even with the distance of the table between them Subaru got a furry feeling on his tongue just from smelling it.

Seishiro put his cup back onto the tray with the perfected motions expected at a tea ceremony and removed his glasses. Putting them in his shirt pocket, he rose and slowly moved around the table.

"Don't forget your tea," he reminded him casually.

Subaru reached for the tiny cup, prepared to sip from it—

Seishiro's hand closed around it and the tea flowed down Subaru's throat in a single gulp, leaving him choking, coughing. "What—"

*—the world exploded. A thousand demons, a thousand dead souls screamed for him, for the living one among them — no, they were the living and he was the dead. They wanted his power, his spirit, their greedy hands clawing into the delicate veil that kept the realms apart, tearing it, blinded by their lust for power no matter its source, no matter the cost—*

*Blossom-covered twigs shot up around him and caught them, tore them to shreds, shielding the veil, sealing the gaps. Petals whispered along his cheek, his mouth, whispering, caressing—*



The bitter tang of Souchong dulled his senses, lying thick and heavy on his tongue. Seishiro's arms were around him; Seishiro's mouth claimed his, sharing the burning tea. Subaru clung to him, coughing, fighting for breath, for—

The tranquil whispers of the wet garden, falling rain, the rustle of fern fronds slowly reached him. He stared into golden eyes. Light eyes. Hard eyes. Eyes no longer hidden by glasses...

"Next time you endanger the realm, keep in mind that some decisions aren't mine alone."

Subaru searched his face, desperate for an explanation, a— "The... tea?" he croaked finally. "...toxic?"

"No." A soft, deadly smile. "*Sakura*."

## 10 — Autumn Colors

*Through all their history, the Sumeragi used tradition and ritual to consolidate their influence over the mighty. Their rituals were designed to impress and obscure and hardly ever changed once they'd founded the Onmyo-ryo near the end of Empress Suiko's reign. A hundred years later — its size had grown to a hundred officials, perhaps half of whom were truly gifted with onmyojutsu — they made sure it became a part of the Daijo-kan, the department of state, and not of the Jingo-kan, the department of worship, thus tightening their hold on power for centuries to come.*

*The Sakurazuka on the other hand have always been more concerned about their independence. Their rituals weren't meant to impress. If it worked, it was recorded; if times changed, it was adapted. Tradition was change, meant to preserve the power. It required a Sakurazukamori to be at least twenty-two when claiming the position; the sakanagi of their brand of magic was too severe for an adolescent to handle. It required him or her to have offspring by then, because few survived longer than a decade and their gift must not be lost. The details had been left to the individual...*

*...until the Mori seized control. They didn't respond well to change. Or independence. The Tree remembered well the outrage when fifteen-year-old Setsuka-chan had presented her Mori-appointed mate with the head of a thief killed the night before — wasting her first kill rather than waiting seven years to claim her position with it.*

*Cotton-pink flowers rustled in amusement. The Mori truly believed Sei-chan to be one of theirs, but the Tree had seen the face behind the thief's mask. It was no wonder that Sei-chan was so good at stealing hearts...*

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
August 21, 1992 — afternoon

The futon was thick and white, the room otherwise empty. The kamidana was gone... A small portable shrine stood at a safe distance from his head; the reverence light was burning in front of it. Silence. The fusuma were closed...

Subaru blinked. His grandmother was sitting next to him, waiting patiently like she had sat beside him when he... "I'm sorry you have to worry about me again," he whispered.

She frowned at his words.

"Subaru-san, do you even know what you did?"

The house remained deadly silent after his grandmother left — presumably to inform the elders that he had woken up. A beam creaked in the ceiling; the flame of the reverence candle flickered. Dark shadows lined the shoji in regular intervals: guards standing outside, protecting...

...him? Or the house from him?

Subaru shivered and slowly sat up. The dull, persistent pain of overworked muscles ran through his body. He pressed his palms against his eyes, recalling desperate cries, blood...

Blood; its sharp, metallic tang pervading sickening incense.

...allowing him to breathe again. He slung his hands around himself, held himself tightly. What had happened? To him? To Akiko.

*"Do you even know what you did?"*

There had been so much blood...

He forced himself to stand, to move. He had to apologize.

Cautiously, he opened the fusuma and left his room, expecting the guards to stop him. They didn't. The one next to his door... Since when did Hamamatsu carry a gun?

The dark wood of the corridor seemed to absorb the light of the sun filtering through the shoji. The honey of the wood polish was mingled with the sharp tang of smoke, the remains of an extended fire purification. Just how long had he slept? Where was...?

"Hamamatsu-san," he asked quietly without looking up. "Where is Akiko-san?"

A brief pause, then: "I'll show you, Subaru-san."

He was led into one of the adjoining buildings. People were whispering. Nobody stopped him. Nobody met his eyes, but he felt them staring at his back, heard their hushed words, their hissed comments.

*Stained.*

*Blooded.*

He shivered.

"Are you cold, Subaru-san?"

The calm inquiry almost startled him. "No, thank you for your concern." It was an automatic reply without meaning.

The side wing was brightly lit, smelling of something more than wood-polish and smoke, a scent growing stronger with every step. Subaru's steps faltered when he recognized it. Antiseptics. And medicine. He pressed a hand to the cool wood of the wall and halted, looking at his feet. "Hamamatsu-san." He almost choked on the words. "Please tell me what happened."

"We hoped you could tell us, Subaru-san."

Hamamatsu indicated the door at the far end of the hallway. A protective ofuda was attached to it. Subaru recognized it as one of his grandmother's. Slowly, with dread, he crossed the last meters and knocked.

The voice on the other side was faint, muffled. "Yes?"

He slowly opened the door. This was the west building; a non-traditional house erected right after the war to accommodate relatives dislodged during the occupation. It was the newest addition to the estate, and also the least propitious. It wasn't right to— It—

Sunlight was streaming into the room, in spite of the veils that covered the plain rectangular window. White bandages on a hastily averted head seemed to glow before long black hair shielded her face from him. "Please..." she whispered, "don't come in—"

Somebody stepped between them. "Didn't you hurt her enough!?" Ayato snarled. "She's blind in her right eye! She'll—"

Subaru didn't understand the rest of the angry words spat at him as he was pushed back. Next to his head, Hamamatsu's hand crashed against the door, keeping Ayato from slamming it into Subaru's face.

"No, don't. I—" Subaru took an unsteady step back, then another, away from the violence and hate. He forced a deep, trembling breath. Why couldn't he stop shaking? Why— "I don't want to— I—" He bowed in reflex. "I'm sorry."

He made it back to his room, managed to close the fusuma before he slowly sank to his knees, burying his face in his hands. Tears streamed over his face, forcing their path through his fingers, sticky, wet, like... like... He bit into his wrist to stifle the sobs. Akiko...

He had bloodied her, had hurt her, had—

*"She's blind in her right eye!"* Ayato had yelled at him, pushing him back.

*"He's blind in his right eye."* Hokuto had whispered, holding his hand.

...Seishiro.

He tasted blood on his tongue. He—

"Subaru-san!" His grandmother's voice. "Hamamatsu, quick!" Somebody gripped his arm, pulled his wrist away from his teeth. He turned his head to the side, avoided their eyes, their anger... He was the head of the clan. He wasn't supposed to cry. He watched the blood beading across his wrist, falling in bright crimson drops onto the tatami. Tears blurred his vision.

"Subaru-san, you're running a fever." His grandmother's hand lay cool on his forehead. "Hamamatsu, see to his injury."

Someone called for antiseptics and bandages; his sleeve was pushed back.

"You should have said something," his grandmother scolded him. He leaned against her touch, felt her dabbing at his cheek. "You are responsible for the clan. How can you continue your line if you aren't healthy?"

Antiseptic spray was applied to his wrist. A gauze pad was pressed over it and bandages...

Always bandages...

Tears welled up in his eyes again, spilling over his cheeks. Exhausted, unable to stop them, he leaned against his grandmother—

"Subaru-san. Get a hold on yourself. You are the head of the house. You can't—"

He curled up on himself. Silent. Nobody must know.

"Subaru-san, I will inform the elders that the council will have to be postponed until you have recovered." Another fleeting touch on his forehead. "Hamamatsu, you will stay with him. Keep the fusuma closed until he has calmed down."

"Yes, Sumeragi-dono."

The faint rustle of tatami followed by the faint squeak of rubber tires on wood, then his grandmother was gone. Subaru thought he felt Hamamatsu's disdainful look on his back and curled up even tighter.

August 22, 1992 — morning

He heard them before he actually reached the hall; a low, agitated murmur behind the fusuma shielding the great hall from the rest of the house. The bloodied tatami had been removed, the house purified with salt and fire. Even now, fire bowls burned left and right of the entrance, carefully watched by the omnipresent guards. The ancient wood and washi of the fusuma burned easily.

They reached up to open them for him, and Subaru's steps faltered. The conversation on the other side sounded angry and concerned. Subaru balled his fists hidden by the sleeves of his kimono. He was at fault. He hadn't fulfilled his duty.

"Subaru-san, the elders are waiting for you." Hamamatsu was his shadow again. "Please don't keep them waiting—" Subaru almost heard the unspoken *again*, but Hamamatsu finished with, "they'll hold me responsible for it."

He nodded quietly, looking briefly over his shoulder at him. Another one was suffering for his failures and he hadn't noticed. He was the one expected to lead them, to shield them, and all he did was bring harm to them. He drew a quiet breath and entered the hall.

Shoulders squared, he bowed before the assembled elders, noticing their sudden quietness as they answered his bow in turn.

"Subaru-san," his grandmother indicated the sitting cushion in front of the assembly. "Please be seated."

He was tempted to throw a glance back, but he knew the fusuma had been closed behind him. Closed, and guarded. He sat down with a sense of dread, his hands resting loosely on his knees. The elders had no reason to think kindly of him any longer. He had failed the clan, had failed in filial piety...

...in the gravest way possible. They expected a reason for it, an explanation, and he had none.

They would expect him to make amends, and he didn't know how.

Nothing could give Akiko back her eye. Nothing. And—

"Subaru-san, please begin by telling us what happened."

He folded his hands tightly around his knees to stop the tremor in his fingers. Expectant eyes stared at him. Somebody's tongue clucked impatiently. He bowed his head in shame.

"Now, now." Tomoaki seldom spoke up among the elders. "Don't hesitate to admit it." At Subaru's startled glance, he smiled jovially. "There's nothing wrong with a bit of rough play — it can be very enjoyable — but the bride bed is hardly the place for it. A young woman has to be taught slowly or—"

"Tomoaki!" his grandmother cut in sharply. "Please excuse my interruption, but this is hardly the occasion for this kind of talk."

Subaru felt sick. They believed he'd done... it... on purpose? To Akiko? He didn't even remember her eyes, only the weight of her stare on his chest, the inability to breathe in the choking heat. He'd have done anything just to be able to breathe again. Anything...

He pressed his hands against his knees. He'd tried desperately to shield her from it, but the room had become so small, so tight and dark. He'd been alone with the thundering heartbeats and hissing breaths that brought no air to his lungs. He—

He'd kept the reverence light burning all last night. His grandmother saw it as a sign of his devout piety, but it was simple cowardice. The dark room had scared him; its warmth, its silence, the loneliness...

...uncontrollable madness raging through him until it burned out from exhaustion...

"I do not know what happened." He met their eyes one after the other and dug his fingernails through the cloth of his kimono into his skin, and continued, "Akiko-san offered the sake and... I don't think I drank from it. I think I didn't even touch the cup. It was so hot and dark... I couldn't breathe and..." He shook his head, fighting against the panic rising in him. "Then there was the blood. And grandmother."

An uncomfortable silence lasted in the hall.

"Possession?" Elder Makoto asked after a while.

"That was my first assumption as well," his grandmother confirmed. "But my tests showed no external influence."

"Did you test the girl as well?" Makoto inquired.

"Yes, she's pure. And aside from the injury untouched."

"The Mikage will demand an explanation and compensation." Makoto's unreadable gaze rested on him. "For the one as well as the other."

early afternoon

The air was filled with the humming of countless insects and the irregular splashing of water trickling over the edge of the rocks into the meditation pond. It was hot and humid. He'd come here right after his meeting with the elders had ended. The reflection of the early afternoon sun on the water hurt his eyes. Amaterasu's

brilliant manifestation burned on his head, on the bared skin of his shoulders. The waterfall was a mere trickle in the current drought; without its spray the heat of Amaterasu's anger was barely bearable.

A year ago, in this very spot — in harae — he had wished, had vowed to kill, to commit the very atrocity for which Amaterasu had turned her face from her brother forever; Tsukiyomi, who was born from Izanagi's *right eye* after Amaterasu had sprung from the left. The surface of the pond rippled with the trembling of his hands. He had brought it about. He had blinded Akiko's right eye like Seishiro's had been blinded because of him.

Seishiro, whom he had vowed to kill, had wished to kill...

He closed his eyes against Amaterasu's angry glare. They were paying compensation to the Mikage, to ensure their silence about the affair. Akiko would stay within the Sumeragi clan, within the house for the time being, together with her brother. The elders had objected to Ayato's presence, but Subaru didn't want to force her to stay under his roof without somebody whom she trusted, even if that person's hatred for him was almost palpable within the wards.

Again and again he tried to remember what happened...

...Akiko offering sake, looking at him with dark, concerned eyes...

...dark brown eyes that, in his mind's eye, turned to amber...

...glowing gold tugging at him, calling him...

...his head throbbed...

...Subaru-kun...

"Subaru-san?"

It was dark and hot, sweltering even. He was covered in sweat just from breathing and he couldn't see anything. Somebody moved beside him. He startled, tried to see, to warn... Subaru coughed and pain exploded in his head, leaving him light-headed and sick. He—

Cold water was sprinkled onto his scorched skin.

"You must abstain from harae over midday," Omi Tono said in a very low voice, placing another cold cloth on Subaru's throbbing forehead. "The month of the gods is too hot for that."

Subaru coughed. "I accept her punishment willingly. I deserve it."

"Yet you are needed." Omi checked his pulse and clucked his tongue. "Amaterasu wouldn't want you to die for it." More water was splashed onto Subaru's chest and poured over his wrists. "Keep still. You have to cool down."

Instead Subaru tried to sit up. "No, grandmother—"

"Don't worry, I won't tell her." Omi, putting a flat hand on his chest, held him down effortlessly. "Now lie still, or she will learn when you don't return in time. Heat exhaustion isn't harmless, and a heat stroke may well kill you."

"Where am I?" Subaru whispered. A shallow bowl was held against his mouth. Warm water touched his lips. He found himself drinking greedily.

"In the shade." Omi told him. "I'd have preferred to bring you inside, but that was too far for me to carry you." Omi took the cloth from his head to soak it in fresh water and Subaru closed his eyes in pain against the sudden brightness. He was grateful when its cool weight blocked out the blinding light again.

He swallowed painfully. He shouldn't be grateful. The light was Amaterasu's gift. He—

Had he forsaken his family's kami entirely?

"Omi-san," he finally croaked in defiance of his throbbing head. "Why?"

"What why?" Omi, wringing another cloth, stilled for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you...?"

"I saw you collapse. Sometimes I go down to the Oi to fish. I can almost pretend to be home in Okutama, with my wife coming down to the lake to complain about me 'bathing the worms again'." He smiled wistfully. "I never thought I'd ever miss that."

Subaru coughed. "...caring?"

"You are the head of the clan." Omi answered. "Of course you are important to us."

Subaru swallowed dry, fought the coughing. "I shamed the clan, I— The elders—" His voice failed.

"The elders are wise people," Omi said dryly. "And wise people can be extraordinarily foolish." He offered the refilled bowl again. "Please, have more water. You have to replace the fluids you lost in the heat."

It took time before Subaru was able to sit up, propped against the trunk, and Omi wouldn't let him walk back through the sun just then. The air under the old tree was filled with the scents of wet earth and wood, strong and calming. Waiting for Amaterasu's manifestation to set, Subaru closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Dried pine needles covered the ground. Somewhere, an early cicada chirped. "*Take better care of yourself.*" Omi had begged him earlier. As if there was a choice. A fox barked angrily on the other side of the river.

When fireflies began to dance over the meditation pond, Subaru finally staggered to his feet. It wasn't until his light-headedness forced him to accept Omi's support for the walk back that he realized how bad his condition really was.

That, and the pain of the shikifuku touching his burned skin, when he went to observe the evening rituals an hour later.

Subaru set the oshiki tablet with the ritual food offerings onto the sanbo and bowed deeply in front of Amaterasu's tablet, catching himself in the last possible moment when he lost his balance. Silently begging for Amaterasu's forgiveness, he hoped desperately none of the people in the hall behind him had noticed. He caught a concerned glance from Omi, sitting a few rows away from where his and the elders' sitting cushions were laid out. As always, the house was gathered at the evening meal. Omi was part of it, too powerful to be considered a lesser relative, but not a bearer of the name, either. Subaru bowed before the elders and took his seat next to his grandmother. He was served first, then his grandmother and the elders...

Rank. Tradition. It wasn't about who was the most hungry, the most deserving. There was blood on his hands, and they still looked to him to eat first. Subaru nearly choked at the tiny morsel he brought to his mouth to allow them to start their meal.

Akiko and her brother weren't there. "She hasn't earned herself a place in the clan," elder Shihoko had stated in council. Subaru had insisted that Akiko shouldn't be held accountable for his crime. He would provide for her, no matter what. She wouldn't have to worry about being at anyone's mercy. He only wished he could take the pain from her as well. It was probably better that she ate with her brother in her room; it would be inhumane to ask her to take her meal with the one who had destroyed her hopes.

"Subaru-san." He nearly dropped his chopsticks at his grandmother's quiet address. "I was concerned when you missed the afternoon offering."

"I am sorry. I was in harae," Subaru bowed his head. "I have much to atone for. I will consider an Oo-harae"<sup>23</sup>

His grandmother nodded approvingly.

Subaru couldn't bring himself to eat.

He didn't see Akiko often while preparing for the Oo-harae. Most of the time she stayed in her room in the west wing. He had arranged for adjacent rooms to be cleared for her and her brother, and he knew she'd set up a small shrine, worshipping Inari.

He had been told her injuries were healing well, though she would retain scars and there was no hope that her right eye would recover. He prayed for her health, her recovery, wishing her well with all his might. He didn't know if it worked. The few times Akiko left the west wing for her necessary role in the purification rituals, she came veiled. A quiet, ghostly shadow in white. She was no longer a child and she couldn't be a wife; tradition had no colors for her and so she had to wear the white of the bride — or the dead. Subaru's fault. His alone.

Her brother openly detested him. Subaru couldn't blame him for it, though he quietly strengthened the spiritual wards. He didn't want Ayato's anger to take shape and haunt his family. He'd have to hurt Ayato if he had to exorcise such a manifestation.

The Nakatomi clan were contacted for their permission to recite the extended norito in the ceremony, and one of their senior priests took residence within the house, making sure the necessary preparations were observed properly. Subaru knew the surveillance sat ill with his grandmother, as well as the fact that the Nakatomi had to learn of the incident at all.

The necessary private interrogation by Nakatomi himself had been one of the most shameful experiences in his life, though he was glad that they wouldn't have to bother the emperor with the matter — something the Nakatomi could have asked for, had they deemed the Sumeragi's sincerity about the purification insufficient.

September 30, 1992

For the third time, Subaru bent his head, clapped his hands, and let the cold water of the ritual bath gush over his bare back. It was four in the morning; the sun hadn't climbed over the eastern mountains yet, but the sky already showed the deepest blue indicating that Amaterasu's arrival wasn't far away.

Subaru dabbed the last water from his skin and dressed in a plain shikifuku. Narrow bands of braided rice straw went around his wrists and neck, followed by small bells not allowed to ring until the impurity was banned. He moved very calmly as he prepared to use the purified straw and dagger Nakatomi had sent him.

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<sup>23</sup> Oo-harae (large purification ceremony) is described in the Yengishiki written in 927 AC. However, I don't have any information about ceremonial details. Any errors are entirely my fault. No offense is intended.

Nakatomi. It was a sign of respect and honor that Nakatomi Michio, the head of the Nakatomi clan himself, was going to direct the ceremony. An imposing man with a solid stature and an aura of power that went beyond the physical.

Subaru collected his hair in a tight ponytail and tied it with the straw at the back of his head. He whispered a fervent prayer, clapped his hands thrice, and reached for the blade...

The ceremony was to begin when the first beam of Amaterasu crossed the horizon.

The shock rippled visibly through the rows of the assembled clan at the sight of Subaru's short-cropped hair. The altar had been set up to the east: towards sunrise. Sandal and Jinko and other sacred woods were burning in large bowls left and right of the altar and a bed of smoldering incense was arranged in front of it.

Subaru offered his cut hair to the flames at the first sunbeam. Ofuda fluttered in the rising morning wind that drove the purifying smoke through the rows of the assembly. Someone coughed. Altar bells jingled faintly. The rustle of the purification wand woven over his head filled his ears. Then Nakatomi's full voice rang out, chanting the haraekotoba; framed by the rising sun, he listed Subaru's sins for all to hear.

The sunburn on Subaru's shoulders and back was long healed, but he felt the stares of the elders burn into his back. They had known of the kunitsu-tsumi he'd committed by injuring his bride, but not of the amatsu-tsumi he'd committed in harae. His vow to kill another had been a crime against the divine and it had taken him more than a year to realize it. Now, they were calling upon the gods to help clean what had been gravely impure for so long. His sins and failures were listed, spelled out to be washed away into the sea, but Subaru knew from experience that they wouldn't be washed away from the ears of the elders, or anyone else. The gods might forgive, but the elders never forgot.

Subaru carefully tugged the black kimono back into place, straightening the five white pentacle kamon on chest, shoulders and back, before tying the obi with slightly unsteady fingers and proceeding with the hakama.

Neither the summons nor the request for formal attire had come unexpectedly. After the successful completion of Oo-harae, Nakatomi Michio had automatically achieved the status of an honored guest at the evening meal.

He knotted the second tie of the hakama, forming the required cross of bow-ties at the first attempt, and sighed at the scratch on the wood outside and Hamamatsu's calm voice, telling him it was time.

Ayato, also in his finest, sporting the stylized fox kamon of the Mikage, left the main hall the moment Subaru stepped into the corridor. His expression darkened, but he stepped obediently aside. "On your way to the next victim?" he hissed under his breath as they passed.

Subaru stopped, startled. "What—?" But Ayato had already turned his back on him and the fusuma were opened, revealing the assembly of his family and their guests. He couldn't possibly call after Ayato.

He crossed the room quietly and bowed respectfully before Nakatomi, occupying the seat of honor next to the elders.

Nakatomi bowed in return, indicating the young woman at his side. "Sumeragi-san, may I introduce my daughter Kizu to you?"

"I'm honored, Nakatomi-san." Subaru repeated the greeting bow to the silent young woman, whose kimono also held the Nakatomi kamon as an intricate embroidery on her chest, and the elders before claiming his seat. He poured the tea for their guest and received his cup from Nakatomi in return.

Kizu-san kept her eyes downcast most of the time and delicately bowed her thanks when she received her tea, her face almost hidden behind her hair which was not black but the color of burnt umber, though she had tried to darken its tint by pinning two small, pale-green paper-fans into it. Pale-green...

...like the icecream had been. He almost had its taste on his tongue. It had been a hard day and he hadn't felt up to bantering with Seishiro and Hokuto over the perfect icecream taste, and its meaning. He hadn't paid attention when Seishiro finally placed the orders, expecting something overly sweet and creamy that stuck endlessly to his tongue. Instead he'd got a simple glass bowl with two pale green scoops and strangely elongated green nut splinters strewn over it. Hokuto had ridiculed the plainness of the dish, but after the first tentative spoonful, he'd just stopped listening — to their banter, the noise, everything. The taste had reminded him of wet wood and fresh leaves and almonds. It had been strangely silent at the table when he finally put the spoon back down, with Hokuto staring at him and Seishiro—

"Sumeragi-sama?" a faint voice inquired next to him. He felt his face warming at his lapse.

"I'm sorry, I—" He stopped. "Do you like pistachio icecream, Kizu-san?"

"I— I like green tea ice," she stammered, surprised. "And chocolate."

"My sister liked chocolate, too," Subaru said quietly with a pang of loss, "and strawberry. She tried to get me to like it, too, but I found it too sweet."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to stir painful memories." She bowed an apology. "What does pistachio taste like? I've never heard of it."

"A bit like almonds," he struggled to explain, "but fresher, more... leafy. It's not bitter, but not sweet either. You ought to taste it sometime."

"I will for sure." She tilted her head, finally looking at him. "Do you think it goes well with green tea?"

"Probably. I'm not sure, I—"

She gave him a true smile and he stopped, uneasy, suddenly keenly aware of the people around them — her father in front of him, his grandmother on his right —, the strange hush in the room full of expectant people. What if he hurt her like Akiko? What—

*"On the way to your next victim?"*

He shuddered. He didn't want to hurt anyone ever... again. He...

*"Get a hold on yourself. You are the head of the house."*

The room was stuffy and hot. Too hot. The flickering reverence lights made red shadows dance on his hands. Blood-red shadows...

Kizu-san smiled at him, laughed faintly, delighted about something he had failed to hear.

Blood on his hands...

Blind in his right eye...

If only it were him.

Only him.

The room was blazing with the reverence lights...

Subaru didn't notice he'd fled the hall until he pushed the fusuma to his room shut behind him, and sat down with his back against it, breathing heavily, fighting for the panic to ease.

Brown hair, black hair.

Dark eyes, amber eyes...

He stared at his hands, clawed into the black-and-grey striped hakama; flattened them and pressed his palms into the rough cloth. Touch. Contact. A craving he couldn't possibly admit. Just to be touched, to be held, not to be responsible for it all, even if it were only for a brief instance, even if it were just an illusion...

He shivered.

He didn't want to remember it. His sister was gone, his grandmother wouldn't, and Seishiro... Sei...

*"You have been under my spell since you and I met again."<sup>24</sup>*

The sob came unexpected. He was unable to keep the tears from pouring over his cheeks. After all this time, all his efforts, Seishiro's calm words were still true.

Someone scratched at the fusuma behind him.

"Subaru-san! Are you in there? Are you alright?" Hamamatsu, forgetting about protocol, rattled the wooden frame.

Subaru balled his fists. He couldn't continue like this. He—

"I am fine, Hamamatsu-san," he said, gathering himself up. "Please deliver my sincerest apologies about my inappropriate departure to our honored guests and the elders." He wiped angrily at his wet cheeks. "Inform them that I have an announcement to make."

"Subaru-san—"

"Go now. I will be there in fifteen minutes."

The main hall was still full of people when he returned, wearing black pants and a sweater, and ordered the electric lamps to be turned on. Their harsh light, despite being shielded by artfully painted silk screens, outshone by far the traditional lamps filled with blessed oil.

He bowed to the offended Nakatomi and apologized for his rudeness towards him and his honored daughter. "But there is indeed a restless spirit who causes all the misfortune that has befallen the clan. And me." A collective, sharp intake of breath followed his explanation. *Mine*, he added in his thoughts. He could lose his position for what he was about to say next. Not that it would matter.

"I will return to Tokyo on the first Shinkansen tomorrow morning." He looked at no one in particular when he continued. "It is of no use for me to stay here while that... business there is still unfinished. I have to lay that spirit to rest before I can take on any other responsibilities. Thank you and please forgive me for failing you." He bowed deeply towards their guests, towards the elders, turned on his heel and left.

He had almost reached the fusuma when voices erupted in the stunned silence behind him.

"Subaru-san!" his grandmother called out, but he had already crossed into the corridor. He knew she wouldn't follow him. As the former head of the clan, she was responsible for the guests once he left the hall and the Nakatomi were of their rank. He shook his head when Hamamatsu moved to follow him. He didn't want company. He had to pack his bag and—

"Subaru-san, please—"

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24 "You have been under my spell since you and I met again." Tokyo Babylon vol. 7 p. 5



Surprised, Subaru stopped and looked back towards the entrance to the big hall and saw Omi Tono hastening toward him. "Wait a moment. I know you don't want assistance," Omi said quietly. "And my skills aren't up to par to even offer it, but if you ever need a safe place to rest for a night or two..." He handed him a plain black-and-white business card. "Miki and I would be honored."

Kyoto Station, Kyoto  
October 1, 1992 — 06:01

Subaru got out of the car, shouldered his bag and looked ahead at the station. October — Kaminazuki in the old calendar, the month without gods — was a fitting month for what he was about to do.

"I'll accompany you to Tokyo," Hamamatsu said behind him. "You'll—"

"No." Subaru denied quietly. "I have to go on my own. You can't protect me." He walked up the stairs to the Shinkansen platform with brisk strides. *You can't protect me from myself.*

## 11 — Spring Squall

*The Sumeragi hunt the spirits who unlawfully enter the world of Man.*

*The Sakurazuka hunt the men who unlawfully enter the world of Spirit.*

*Both protect the border between the realms of the living and the dead, but they do it from opposite sides — so to speak.*

*The Sakura extended a mental tendril and touched the sleeping mind — so strong, entirely Sei-chan's match should he ever decide to fight for real; and yet so delicate, almost fragile.*

*Sei-chan had been right when he prepared the Souchong beforehand. The Tree's blossom-cushioned branches quivered in the breeze of the eternal maboroshi. It had been angry at Sei-chan when he cut the connection prematurely, leaving the Sumeragi's lesson incomplete. But then, it hadn't thought someone that powerful could be so sensitive.*

*The Tree extended a small twig and brushed lightly over the sleeping man's cheek, then his throat. Amused, it watched the sleeper squirm, wondering if Sei-chan even realized how much in tune the two of them already were.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
April 4, 2000

Subaru woke from cold air touching his skin. Seishiro had put his feet to the floor and sat slumped forward on the edge of the bed with his elbows resting on his thighs. The clear light drew him in harsh, sharp lines until he pushed himself up and threw the cover back onto the bed, leaving the room without looking back.

*"Keep in mind that some decisions aren't mine alone."*

Subaru shivered, and only partly from the chill in the air. He glanced at the bedside clock. 09:01. Later than usual, but nevertheless he felt tired. It had been barely midnight when he'd woken from the first nightmare about sakura entangling him, hands reaching for him, tearing at him, pulling— He'd screamed and then, sitting in bed, buried his face in his hands and waited for his racing heart to calm down.

*"Sleep..."* Seishiro had grumbled at the other side of the bed and, turning his back to him, had pulled the cover up over his ears.

It had taken the better part of an hour to follow the curt advice, only to start awake again.

*"Let it be, dammit!"* Seishiro had muttered, annoyed. Or had that been *"Let him be"?*

Uneasy, Subaru had curled up under the warm cover that smelled more of detergent and aftershave than sakura...

When he'd startled awake the third time, Seishiro had wordlessly tucked him under his chin, holding him like a small child. The nightmares had stopped.

Angry at himself, Subaru got up and padded into the bath when he realized that he didn't want to go back to sleep now that he'd be alone in the large bed. Splashing a handful of cold water into his face, he threw a tired glance into the bathroom mirror before he pushed his damp hair out of his face and headed towards the kitchen for breakfast.

Seishiro was reading the morning paper; one elbow resting on the table, long legs stretched comfortably sideways into the kitchen. Yoshi had curled around his left foot, a sizable paw playing leisurely with the by now red-tabby-dusted hem of black pants. Seishiro ignored the cat—

*"Good morning."*

—and him, turning a page as if he hadn't heard anything. Subaru sighed and went to make his tea and toast. He didn't feel like eating, but he didn't feel like arguing over not-eating, either.

A purr arose behind him, followed by the faint rustle of another page being turned. *Leave it to Seishiro to be adored by a cat with a foot fetish*, Subaru thought, amused, as the fresh, slightly bitter tang of green tea permeated the kitchen. Carrying a plate with two toast slices and his tea, Subaru stepped across Seishiro's legs — plus the attached cat — and sat down at the table.

He buttered his toast and studied the headlines of Seishiro's paper while chewing. The lead story was titled *'Economy shakes off worries'* and *'Trust in manufacturing companies rebounds due to dampened yen'*. Trust was an issue here, too; the wall of paper Seishiro had erected between them hadn't budged once by the time Subaru finished his toast.

He reached for his tea and looked out the window at plain, seldom cut grass with bald spots around the flag stones, and thought of the fern-covered walls he'd seen yesterday. The garden was really a disgrace.

13:26

Subaru balanced the tray on his left hip and stretched to push open the garden gate. The nine pots of delicate-looking wood ferns had proved surprisingly heavy on the way up from the small garden center down in Ueno.

He used an earth-smeared hand to wipe the sweat off his forehead and made his way around the house to the back yard, where a ginkgo in the far corner shaded the garden. The tree was much older than the house and the graveyard beyond. Its upper trunk was partially burned, likely from the fire bombings of World War II; still countless pale nuts from last year lay on the ground around it. Subaru wondered why Seishiro had kept the tree; the rotten-eggs stench of the falling fruit would fill the whole yard in autumn. On the other hand, few trees had as much protective power as a female ginkgo. Subaru smiled; it would also protect his ferns. An old wooden deck chair stood where the wide branches reached towards the roof. It looked abandoned, with weeds growing through its foot end. He put the tray down on its seat and began loosening and wetting the earth between the gnarled trunk and the wall.

Carefully, he removed the pots from the fern plants and put them into the soil, patting the earth around them for a firm hold. It was dirty work which, in itself, was strangely pure and calming to him as he arranged the various kinds of mosses and ferns to complement the rough grey stones of the high wall separating the Yanaka graveyard from the lawn.

Seishiro had shrugged when Subaru told him he wanted to work on the garden, insisting only that he avoided large, flowering plants and didn't 'make too much of a fuss', which was why Subaru had chosen the ferns as a start. They didn't need much care once their roots took hold. He brushed the delicate fronds of a color fern into order and began digging a hole for the roots of a thick eagle fern.

"Subaru-san?"

He froze. His hands still buried in the wet earth, he glanced warily over his shoulder.

"Good. I finally found you. Please—" His grandmother stopped in mid-sentence, shock and surprise warring on her face. Two ofuda, seemingly forgotten in her hands, glowed in the shadow of the ginkgo; its leaves rustling in the light breeze.

"Grandmother," he acknowledged her quietly. It had been almost a year since they had met face to face. She'd been contacted when he was hospitalized after the Ikebukuro incident last Summer, but travel to Tokyo in the chaos of the Final Year had been deemed too much of a risk for the twelfth head — especially when the life of the thirteenth was already at stake.

Belatedly, his manners kicked in and he stood, wiping his hands on his pants, and bowed. "Be welcome. I apologize for not offering tea, but—" He indicated the spot of watered earth and the partially planted ferns, "—I wasn't expecting guests."

"Naturally, since you were hiding behind a repellent strong enough for you to even leave the gate open." She folded the ofuda back into her deep kimono sleeve and studied him calmly. All of a sudden, Subaru was very aware of his unkempt hair, the rolled-up sleeves of his worn turtleneck and his earth-smeared pants. "You look well, despite your appearance," his grandmother finally admitted, waiting for him to explain himself. When he said nothing, she nodded. "Yes, I admit that the matter at hand requires more private treatment." She swiveled her chair. "We should discuss it inside."

"That's impossible," Subaru hurried to say before she reached the corner. "The— the house isn't at ground-level." He had to keep her outside; she'd certainly notice Seishiro's wards inside. He blushed under her hard stare, adding hastily, "and it's not spacious enough for your chair. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "Subaru-san, this is not the right environment for somebody of your station. The close proximity to Kaneiji and Jomyoin temple may be somewhat reassuring, but it is unhealthy for you to live next to a cemetery, especially one as large as the Yanaka. You have to think of your spiritual integrity and your reputation. Besides, Sakuragi is hardly a suitable address for you; the lack of access to public transportation is unacceptable."

"I've come to like it," Subaru stated defensively. "It's quiet."

"I know that the last year put extraordinary strain upon you." She sighed. "But you mustn't hide from your clan. We were concerned."

"The Final Battle forced me to act at rather short notice, grandmother. I kept my schedule as best I could, given the circumstances. Please accept my humble apology if I distressed you and the elders while fulfilling my duty as a Seal. It certainly wasn't my intention to hide from you."

"You weren't hiding behind a repellent that even I needed three days to circumvent? Behind a phone number redirected to an anonymous voice box, the calls to which you never answered?" His grandmother looked at him levelly. "Subaru-san, you didn't even mark your name on the door."

"That might be because it isn't his house," a calm voice said behind them. Seishiro, seemingly carefree, put a grocery bag down on the stones. "The Ozu paper was out. I brought some sheets of Uchiyama and Inshu instead."<sup>25</sup>

"Subaru-san!" His grandmother's shields flared up, so very similar to his own; Seishiro's intimately familiar power rose to the challenge. Subaru reeled under the impact, clinging to his shields to protect Seishiro from the sudden white-hot flame that his marks had become. Hearing the song of the dead vibrate with the sound of a thousand swords being drawn from their sheaths, he leaped forward, bringing himself between his grandmother and Seishiro. This was Seishiro's ground, his house, his turf, shielded to withstand a Kamui, shielded to survive the Final Year. Even from as far as Kyoto, his grandmother had been hurt facing the Sakurazukamori in a hospital room, a room of a building meant for healing. Now she was on his ground, with sakura petals glittering in the clear air. Wind sickles howled. Neither of them would back down. He had to stop them. He—

"No!" Dropping his shields completely, Subaru bared himself — body and spirit — to their weapons. He felt his marks on Seishiro's hands burn even hotter, his hold slipping, knew he was hurting Seishiro; his own scars echoed with scorching pain. He reached for Seishiro, stopped—

"No..." He repeated in the sudden silence as he stood between them, looking at Seishiro, willing him with his eyes to understand before he slowly turned to face his grandmother with open, relaxed palms. Turning his unprotected back to the Sakurazukamori was madness, but it was a matter of trust. — *I trust you, so you can trust me.* — He knew that Seishiro wouldn't see the second part, but his grandmother would, and he could only hope it made a difference. He wouldn't survive this for long; his heart faltered, trying to follow two rhythms.

"Fool," Seishiro said quietly behind him.

"She is my grandmother," Subaru returned without looking at him. The hardened grass blades his grandmother used as weapons still hung in the air, poised to strike.

"And?"

"Subaru-san! Stop protecting our enemy."

"I need him." *No, that was wrong.* His grandmother's power flared. Subaru's thoughts tumbled. If only the words didn't feel so terribly right. A grass blade shot forward— He moved without thought, caught it with his hand before it came near Seishiro's shields and didn't even wince when his palm was sliced open.

Seishiro's shields closed around him. Familiar. Warm.

Seishiro's voice wasn't. "Let's bring this to an end," he challenged.

"Even you can't keep that up for long!" his grandmother returned.

"We'll see about that." Strong wings suddenly hovered overhead. Storm rose, battered the branches, threatened the fronds of the freshly planted ferns. In return, grass blades joined together to form daggers. The hoarse call of a crane answered the fierce scream of the hawk. Woven blades glittered—

"*I need him!*" Subaru yelled across the turmoil, forcing his way out of the protective shield extended around him. A blade scraped his cheek; his grandmother had been too surprised to stop it in time. "He's the other source of the Dao!"

The tempest died. Grass, soft and green again, rained to the ground. "Dao?" she inquired. "You called—?"

Seishiro's wind sickles remained as glittering whirlwinds in the air. Subaru intercepted the first one calmly, noting that it dissolved before it actually cut his skin. He drew a deep breath and took a step back from his grandmother, almost sighing in relief when his fingers touched Seishiro's arm, sliding down to his wrist, his hand... skin on skin, mark on mark. He was caught around the waist. Bright red blood was smeared on Seishiro's sleeve. Subaru's knees buckled. *When...?* "I'm sorry," he whispered, dizzy.

Seishiro trailed a fingertip across his cheek, showed it to him. Also red. "She bloodied you," he said matter-of-factly. He raised Subaru's slit palm to his lips, licking it. "More than once." Subaru drew a deep, strenuous breath. He closed his eyes, fighting against a wave of nauseating bliss...

"Subaru-san." His grandmother's shocked voice penetrated the spell Seishiro was weaving around him. "He's the murderer of your sister!"

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25 Japanese Papers: Inshu paper is made from a mixture of mulberry and mitsumata fibers and is widely used for calligraphy and in fusuma and shoji. In earlier times, it was also used to make paper balloon bombs, which is why the 12th head of the Sumeragi would strongly object to using this paper. Ozu paper is made from a mulberry (or other organic fibers) bleached in sun light and is widely used for calligraphy. Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, is the family kami of the Sumeragi. Uchiyama paper is made from mulberry fibers bleached with snow and highly regarded for calligraphy and shoji screens. Snow is associated with Winter and Tsukiyomi, therefore grandmother won't be too thrilled finding Subaru using it, either.

"I know. I—" He shook his head, trying to clear it, and couldn't bring himself to meet her eyes. "Please... Grandmother, leave. I— I'll call you soon and explain. Promise." His head fell back against Seishiro's shoulder.

"I can't possibly leave you h—"

"It's all right, grandmother," he said without opening his eyes, working hard for his voice not to slur. "Trust me. I'm all right." He only wished he could trust himself...

Magic rose again, sizzled, danced over his skin. Seishiro's fingers pressed, scalding hot, against his throat. "Leave," Seishiro said deceptively soft next to his ear.

The gate closed with a loud, final clang.

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
April 5, 2000

"Call your grandmother," Seishiro said bluntly when Subaru slouched into the kitchen the next morning, "if you don't want her to be fern fodder."

"I already tried to contact her." Subaru yawned, taking a bottle of water out of the fridge. "But the main house said she wasn't available at the moment. I left a message saying I'll try again later." He sat down and pressed the cold glass against his throbbing forehead. His free hand was wrapped in a thick gauze pad, though he didn't remember it being applied. He didn't remember anything after his grandmother had left. The gate had fallen shut and— nothing. He didn't recall getting out of his blood-and-earth-stained clothes and into bed, but he knew that he'd slept with Seishiro literally curled around him; otherwise the marks would be a lot less bearable now.

He had to call his grandmother, and not because Seishiro was running out of patience, but he seriously wondered what to tell her. *I'm sorry, we put the Final Battle on hold and I sleep with the Sakurazukamori to dodge the side-effects?* He groaned when against all odds his headache managed to increase.

"Keep yourself shielded," Seishiro commented and went to pour himself a fresh coffee. "Simple advice." Seemingly lost in thoughts, he flexed his hand when he returned to the table, blowing at the steaming mug. The frightened cartoon ghost on it was trapped in a red stop sign above the slogan: *"I ain't 'fraid of no ghost!"*

"Are your hands all right?" Subaru asked quietly.

Seishiro put the mug down. "They're fine." He reached for the sugar bowl.

"Illusion." Subaru caught his wrist. "Don't lie to me. Let me see the scars."

"I carry your marks. You should be able to tell when I'm lying."

"You know as well as I that I can only detect a lie that you consider to be one," Subaru returned wryly, his fingers tracing the outlines of Seishiro's scars. "You're a very gifted liar, splitting truth finer than silk."

That earned him a smile. The pentacle marks under Subaru's fingertips deepened, became thicker, redder. First degree burns, Subaru judged, surprised that the injury wasn't more severe. Or was this another illusion?

"It's real," Seishiro stated bluntly. "It didn't last long enough to do serious damage." He freed his hand and sweetened his coffee. Taking a first sip, he unfolded his newspaper. "But I'd prefer you to keep your relatives from straying onto my property."

The phone rang. Subaru's ring tone. He didn't want to get it. Not until his headache had calmed down. It could be grandmother. Or the elders. Or— After the fourth ring, Seishiro peered over the edge of his paper. "Answer. Or block the line."

Subaru pushed himself up.

"That was Ishido-san. The cabinet resigned yesterday. They want me to perform the exorcism before they elect the new premier this afternoon." Seishiro merely raised his brow. "I couldn't refuse again." Subaru added quietly.

"So you've got to work today?" Seishiro folded the paper and laid it next to his emptied dish. "Do you want me to come along?"

"Yes." He drew a deep breath. "And to stay out of sight."

"Subaru-kun, are you telling me to work illusions on honored members of the Japanese parliament and police force? Do you know what you're asking of me?"

Subaru snorted. "It's not as if you never worked illusions there before. Kamui gave a good description of your maboroshi at Hinoto's."

"Just a social call." Seishiro shrugged. "I don't see why—"

"Look, I just don't know how to explain your presence in the National Diet. I haven't been able to reach grandmother yet — and believe me I tried! — and I don't want to provoke her any more than we already did. She might do something rash!"

"Provoke her? So me taking a tourist stroll through the Diet is more offensive to her than me sleeping with her grandson." Seishiro laughed, getting up. "Peculiar priorities." His shape wavered and disappeared. No cherry blossoms this time, not even a flicker of light. "Sufficient?" his discarnate voice asked.

Subaru nodded, relieved. "Yes, thank y— eep!" A firm hand had patted his bottom.

"Out of sight, not out of touch."

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Nagata-cho, Tokyo  
National Diet Building  
April 5, 2000 — 09:12

Hidden in illusion, Seishiro waved his ID card over the entrance scanner and wondered if he should tell Subaru that he wasn't actually invisible to the cameras and motion detectors which were a vital part of the Diet Building's security. Probably. In the meantime the illusion certainly spared him a lot of unimportant chatter. He clipped his ID to his lapel as he strolled down the corridor after Subaru and that blustering government gook Ishido.

Ten minutes later he leaned, hands in his suit pockets, against the wood-paneled wall near the side entrance of the Chamber of Representatives and watched Subaru argue with a Shinto priest who had been about to perform a purification ceremony when they arrived. Subaru was not pleased about the priest's presence, though one had to know him well to recognize the additional sharpness in his movements. After a moment, they exchanged repeated bows and the priest stepped back, leaving the hall through the main entrance, its heavy double doors closing behind him with a dull bang.

Seishiro smirked. The Sumeragi did have some clout, he gave them that. He rested his shoulder more comfortably against the wall. The exorcism would take a while.

Down in the hall Subaru was setting up a small altar holding a central mirror which reflected a shallow water bowl in front of it. He placed new fuda around it — the Uchiyama paper had indeed survived the night outside — and laid out two ritual daggers. Seishiro wondered who'd pay for the floor if Subaru was forced to use them and admired deft, slender hands untangling their silk tassels, smoothing the crane feathers.

He imagined those feathers trailing down Subaru's body, while the dagger cut open his shikifuku. A teasing, tantalizing caress following the cold steel of the blade on its trail down the chest and abdomen, then lower, stirring the fire underneath with its combination of promise and threat.

The scent of purified oil reached him. Subaru had lit two reverence lamps left and right of the altar and now began with the first mantra.

In Seishiro's fantasy wanton moans replaced the mantra; in his mind's eye he pulled the band of prayer beads from Subaru's shoulders and moved it tantalizingly slow past Subaru's already erect sex, listening to his gasp when he pushed the first bead, slicked with reverence oil, into him. Subaru would strain against the ties holding him, squirming, maybe pleading while bead after bead entered him, spreading him, filling him until he'd arch and present his weeping sex in offer to the gods, the remaining beads swinging freely between his legs...

The object of Seishiro's daydream was intoning the second mantra, his fuda beginning to glow with the warm red light of his power. Fortunately, the marks didn't enable mind reading of any kind; otherwise his prey would outshine a traffic light by now. With a satisfied grin, Seishiro watched the third mantra direct the summoned power along the imaginary lines of the pentacle, thus closing the banning field before the fourth invoked the restless spirit.

Something shrieked, wavered, took form. Subaru didn't show it, but Seishiro felt his sudden tension through the marks. Inside the banning field was...

"Hinoto-hime."

The blind dreamseer's spirit raised a fragile, translucent hand towards Subaru behind the red veil of the banning field, flickered, screeched...

...and disappeared in a blast of black fire that tumbled the candles, upended the water bowl and threw Subaru back into the first row of floor seats. Seishiro pushed himself off the wall, reached for his lighter. Subaru snatched the left dagger while his right produced a protective fuda. With a fluid move, he nailed it to the floor, driving the slim blade deep into the ancient parquet, while the empty banning field flickered and died. The spell sizzled around the paper. Sparks flew; the paper rustled against the steel, then it calmed and lay still.

Without a second glance at the mess of scattered wax, torn fuda, and spilled water behind him, Subaru headed for the doors, his shikifuku fluttering behind him. "Keep this room sealed off until I say otherwise," he ordered the guards and Ishido waiting outside. Throwing his white coat around his shoulders, he covered the shikifuku.

Deputy minister Ishido wrung his hands. "The representatives are going to meet in four hours—"

"I'll try to be done by then." Subaru walked with brisk strides down the hallway. Still cloaked in illusion, Seishiro hurried to follow. "If not, have them meet elsewhere." Ishido blanched at that. Subaru ignored it. "And I need access to the basement. Now."

National Diet Building  
Basement

"Yes, she certainly died here." Seishiro, having forgone the hiding illusion down here, nodded towards the raised dais, where Hinoto had spent most of her adult life — if it could be called a life, that was. An extended brownish stain covered parts of the magical circle on the white tatami mats there. "Dried blood."

"Sohi and Hien obviously tried to defend her." Subaru, pressing a handkerchief over the wound in his palm which had reopened when he'd driven the dagger into the floor, studied the white chalk outlines of two bodies and looked over the damaged furniture. "The police will have collected whatever evidence there was. I'll have to send for their report."

"Useless. They collect only what they perceive." Seishiro scanned the debris that littered the floor everywhere. Remnants of rush curtains and papers were mixed with rubble from wall casings and ceiling. The fight down here certainly had been... lively. Paper scraps in a corner caught his attention. He crouched to examine them closer. Although they were crumpled and torn, the dark aura was unmistakable. The signature was that of Hinoto and yet... not. Not solely. "Have a look at this," he called Subaru.

"That's... one of Hinoto's." Subaru studied the paper carefully. "I don't understand this... I was face to face with her on the morning before... we fought on Rainbow Bridge and I felt none of this darkness." He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back. "I should have—"

"She likely wore her pure self as a cloak." Seishiro shrugged. "That's my field of work, not yours."

Subaru frowned. "There's a second signature imprinted on it. Mikkyo<sup>26</sup>, I think, probably a goho doji; certainly not part of Hinoto or her guardians as far as I can tell, and very weak."

Seishiro nodded. "We ought to follow it."

"It's too weak. It will scatter and disappear in the dark spell if I set my shikigami on it."

Seishiro smiled. "My field of work," he repeated casually.

Subaru studied him with narrowed eyes. "You can track that?"

Seishiro arched a brow at the suspicious question. "Payment?" he asked.

"I don't have time for games." Subaru's eyes glittered coldly, then... "Yes."

"As you wish," Seishiro smirked. It wasn't as if this was particularly difficult, it just needed the right idea and a lot of practice. Subaru hunted spirits; for him the strong signatures were important, but Seishiro's targets, humans abusing spiritual power, usually left far weaker trails. He framed the paper scraps with his hands, enclosing them in a small globular banning field which he carefully attuned to the weak signature, then he surrounded it with a second globe holding the dark magic of the fuda itself. Pulling his hands apart, he separated the fields and dismissed the one holding Hinoto's spell before calling his shikigami.

Roppongi-cho, Tokyo  
38 minutes later

With a hoarse cry the hawk circled, returned and settled down on its owner's shoulder. "There." Seishiro nodded towards a dark gap between two buildings. "I suggest you go around the next building and cut the escape route. Chasing through a maze like this is something you don't want to do when you're in a hurry."

As expected, the gap proved to be the opening to a narrow lane that ran past the back entrances of several businesses opening their fronts to the main street. The place itself could have starred in the graphic novel he'd read at hanami. The smell certainly could. Dispassionately, Seishiro watched the target in front of him hurling a bulky bag into a garbage container.

"You strayed into my territory," he said softly, stopping Arisugawa before he reached the backdoor of the bar he'd likely emerged from.

Wariness. Apprehension. "What are you doing here?" Arisugawa inquired.

Seishiro shrugged, his shikigami spreading its wings for balance. "Did you think I'd miss a poacher in the Diet?"

"No, I—"

"Arisugawa-kun.<sup>27</sup>" Subaru had finally rounded the building and came from the other side. "I need to talk with you about what happened at the Diet building."

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<sup>26</sup> Mikkyo is a system of practical Buddhist "magic" involving mantras and incantations.

<sup>27</sup> Arisugawa-kun and Kishuu-san vs. Sorata and Kishuu. Subaru calls Sorata 'Arisugawa-kun' in the manga. He never addresses

Seishiro put his hands in his coat pockets. "More precisely beneath it."

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The nearby boarding house catered to foreigners as well as the growing number of day laborers who couldn't afford the amount of key money required to rent a flat in Tokyo these days. Subaru studied Sorata as they were led to a small occupants' lounge at street level, noting the loss of weight as well as the lines that had appeared in his fellow Seal's face since he'd last seen him. Arisugawa Sorata wasn't doing too well.

Fortunately, the lounge was deserted at this time of day and with Seishiro leaning in the door frame, legs casually crossed at the ankles, they could talk freely. Nobody would barge in on them. And nobody would escape.

A detail certainly not lost on Sorata, who hunched down at one of the tables; his eyes kept flitting to Seishiro and back to Subaru, occupying the chair opposite his. "You are working... together?"

"Joint venture. Kind of." Seishiro shrugged.

Subaru sighed. "Arisugawa-kun. What happened at the Diet?"

"Arashi." Sorata drew a deep breath. "No, that isn't it. It's... Kamui caught a shiki sent by Hinoto to spy on us at Ginza. I used the ofuda to send a goho doji back to spy on her in return. That way I learned about Hinoto trapping Arashi, and I went to confront her."

"On the day of the Final Battle?"

"I am destined to die for the woman I love," Sorata quoted grimly.

Seishiro in the door snorted audibly. "Why do people always ignore the time frame in prophecies? You can die for her when she's a granny of a hundred and fifteen."

"Save your words," Sorata said flatly. "I'm already dead. I took three lives, two of them blinded but innocent. My way to enlightenment has been cut; my next incarnation will be in Naraka<sup>28</sup>. It doesn't matter that Hinoto had trapped Arashi and manipulated the Final Battle. When she called Sohi and Hien to her help and they didn't believe me that that creature wasn't their princess, I struck them down." He averted his eyes. "I didn't think Arashi had much time to get out of there."

"Where's Kishuu-san now?" Subaru asked softly.

"Upstairs, sleeping. She isn't well, and I don't like leaving her alone all day in a place like this, but I— I can't do any better. I'm already working three jobs and can barely make ends meet. I—"

"Back to the Diet," Seishiro snapped, impatiently. "What exactly did you do to the princess?"

"None of your business!" Sorata retorted.

"Do you want me to make it *your* business?" Seishiro asked sweetly.

Subaru gave him a warning glance. "Arisugawa-kun, Hinoto's spirit is haunting the Diet Building. She had considerable spiritual power and I need to know as much as possible about the circumstances of her death in order to move her on successfully."

Sorata winced. "I couldn't break her protective shields, so I took down part of the ceiling. I—"

"Death by secondary means." Seishiro nodded. "Not bad. Explains nicely why the Metropolitan police aren't looking for you."

"They aren't?" Sorata, forgetting his disdain for Seishiro, stared at him.

"It's filed as 'accidental death in earthquake'." Seishiro shrugged. "Actually shortened my to-do list in January."

"Hinoto was an official case of yours?" Subaru asked, surprised.

"The blind dreamseer had considerable influence in the politics of Japan. An influence that became oppressive over the course of last year." He casually lit a cigarette. "I got the case in October, but I was kind of busy then. You aren't the only one behind schedule because of the Final Year, Subaru-kun." He slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke. "Too bad your fellow Seal didn't bother to seal the spiritual essence before taking out the body. The file's back on the stack."

"My stack, not yours," Subaru corrected.

"Depends on perspective. I'd like to know what we face at the Diet before declaring my case closed."

"If we had something Hinoto touched right before her death," Subaru thought aloud, "we might be able to read the changed signature and estimate how much of her power her changed self had controlled by the time she died."

"The girl," Seishiro said from the door.

"What!?" Sorata leaped to his feet. "You're not going near—"

"Please calm down, Arisugawa-kun." Subaru laid a hand on his arm and stood as well. "I'll go."

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Arashi directly. Both address Subaru as 'Subaru-san', though. Since Sorata also introduces himself quite informally as 'Arisugawa Sorata-chan', I decided to have Subaru think of him as Sorata, but given Arashi's earnestness, I don't think he'd do the same for her.

28 Naraka is the name of one of the worlds of greatest suffering in Buddhist cosmology. A being is born into Naraka as a direct result of his or her previous karma (actions of body, speech and mind), and resides there for a very long time until he or she will be reborn in a higher sphere



The small room didn't hold much furniture aside from the standard wall closet for the futons and a table with two chairs under the narrow window. It was kept meticulously clean. Subaru closed the door silently behind him. The futon was rolled out in a corner where the direct light from the window wouldn't disturb the sleeper. Kishuu's black hair spilled over the plain, off-white cotton cloth. She was pale, with deep shades under her eyes as if she weren't getting enough sleep. One of her hands was clawed around the edge of the futon, crumpling the cheap cloth.

She blinked when Subaru came closer and looked up at him, not startled, not surprised, as if she'd expected him to be there.

"Sumeragi-san," she said weakly. "Please be seated. I'm sorry I can't fulfill my duties any longer — not as a Seal, not as... Hidden Miko of Ise. I—" She turned her head aside. "The sacred blade is lost. I—" She fell silent and stared at the unwashed wall.

"Kishuu-san, may I read your aura?" Subaru asked quietly.

She nodded without looking at him and he knelt quietly at her side, concentrating. There were indeed injuries in her aura: the outer layer seemed frayed, worn, as if she'd been wrapped in something harmful that had abraded her spiritual shields; but the injuries didn't reach her inner core, which was shining brightly, pulsing with life, with... Subaru shook his head, averting his eyes. He didn't have a right to look there. At any rate, the spiritual injuries were already fading.

By the time he was done, she was asleep again. He bowed his farewell and left quietly, locking the door behind him.

"Hinoto's perverted power had enclosed her completely," he told them when he returned downstairs, "but she didn't suffer spiritual injuries aside from a general abrasion of her aura, which is already recovering." Sorata nearly slumped in relief. Subaru squeezed himself past Seishiro and reclaimed his seat. "The spiritual signature is very different from what Hinoto-hime initially felt like. She was a being of Air and Water — mostly Air, in fact — but what clawed into Kishuu-san was Fire; Fire and Metal, meant to burn and to cut. If Hinoto were still alive I'd test her for possession, but a possession would have ended with her death. But if both parts were originally components of her self and she suppressed one of it, then it's likely that the suppressed one became dominant under the stress during the Final Year."

"Air and Metal. Pure Yin and pure Yang," Seishiro mused. "The two components of her spirit are diametrically opposed to each other; split clearly between Heaven and Earth."

"Yes. And the Yang force alone was strong enough to enclose somebody as spiritually strong as Kishuu-san." Subaru searched Seishiro's silhouette in the door frame. "It won't be enough to trap only one part of her spirit."

"You'll have to enclose both." Seishiro, still blocking the door, dragged at the tiny rest of his cigarette.

"Their motivations are fully antithetic. What compels one to move on, prompts the other to stay. They'll have to be exorcised separately and simultaneously. But the Diet wants to be in session within two hours. That's not enough time to send for a second Sumeragi to—"

"I will help," Sorata offered. "I—"

"No, Arisugawa-kun," Subaru said immediately. "Hinoto-hime is spiritually too strong. I trapped one part of her spirit in a banning field earlier and it nearly blew up in my face."

"But I defeated her even in life—"

A dry, humorless chuckle erupted from Seishiro. "While they have bodies they're pretty harmless. There's a reason why I try to get my prey before it hatches."

Subaru lowered his eyes briefly, then met Seishiro's gaze squarely. "Could you...? I know it's not your business, but—"

"Actually, it is. And if we don't confuse them with facts—"

"— like the Dao, and the Final Battle being kept undecided—"

"—the dark self might just listen to a Dragon of Earth telling her what she wants to hear." Seishiro pushed his glasses higher up his nose. "Since I didn't exactly return my membership card..." He shrugged.

"But Hinoto's a dreamseer—" Sorata warned them. "She'll—"

"Wrong," Seishiro returned. "She's a *dead* dreamseer."

"Belonging to a different reality," Subaru added. "As long as she died before we raised the Dao..." He looked at Sorata. "Did you kill her before the kekkai flared back to life or afterwards?"

"I'm not sure." Sorata scratched his head. "I was too focused on Arashi and the one down there was never destroyed, so... no idea."

Subaru turned to Seishiro. "If she died afterwards, then she's within this reality and the spirits might regain the ability to dreamsee over time."

"But not clearly. And not yet." Seishiro dropped the cigarette to the floor. "Otherwise, they'd be at each others' throats instead of spooking all over the place." He crunched the butt under his heel. "Just bear in

mind that I'm not an exorcist. I can't send a spirit on if it isn't persuaded to go. I can relocate them to Diyu-Yomi<sup>29</sup> and make sure they don't return in their current incarnation, but it's force, not persuasion."

Subaru nodded. "I hope to give Hinoto-hime's spiritual essence a chance to recombine and move on whole, but the integrity of the National Diet building and the safety of the living takes precedence. I will try to persuade them, but if her dark self doesn't comply..." He balled his fist. "Then do what you must." He stood. "And Arisugawa-kun — you might want to have Kishuu-san medically examined."

"I tried to, but she doesn't want to go. She insists it's a spiritual problem and that a physician wouldn't be of help."

"That might be true," Subaru said quietly. "Or not. I'm not sure, but Ise is the main shrine of Amaterasu, who is the spender of life and abhors killing. Yet, the Hidden Miko of Ise carries Amaterasu's sword. I wouldn't be surprised if the goddess recalls that gift when her other function becomes predominant. Which might be the case if you didn't... take precautions."

Sorata stared. "If I...?"

Seishiro chuckled. "Didn't have safe sex."

Sorata paled. "You mean Arashi's—?"

"I'm no physician, Arisugawa-kun. But it might explain why Amaterasu denies her her weapon." Subaru took his apartment key from his pocket and gave it Sorata. "Here, use my apartment for the time being. I haven't been there for a while, so it might be worse for wear, but at least it's a decent place for you and Kishuu-san to stay for the time being."

"Won't your landlord demand an explanation?"

"I own the place." He threw a brief look towards Seishiro waiting impatiently by the door and gave Sorata a weak smile. "And it doesn't look like I'm going to use it again any time soon."

"What makes you think I'll allow you to stay so long that you can give up your apartment?" Seishiro asked casually as they hurried back towards the Diet.

"The amount I still owe you," Subaru returned dryly. "Or are you going to give me a discount?"

Seishiro at his side laughed faintly. "No. You'll have to pay to the full."

They continued in silence.

"I will call Hinoto's Air-self to the circle in the Chamber of Representatives. Hinoto-hime was a government adviser for many years," Subaru said after a while. "That changed only last year."

"Yes," Seishiro confirmed. "I got her file when there were signs of willful manipulation."

"Do you normally get cases of suspected disloyalty?"

"No, but she was a dreamseer of considerable influence. They didn't trust normal detectives not to be caught in her web."

"She was really considered dangerous?"

"By October, yes." They rounded the last corner and came into sight of the National Diet. Seishiro looked up at its tower as they crossed the street. "Considering what we know now, I guess she'd have been a valid target." He slipped his hands in his pockets and retrieved his ID. "I'm taking the service entrance. It's got a direct link to the basement."

Subaru stopped. "How—?"

"The Metal-self was naturally selfish. She should be easiest called into the space where Hinoto spent most of her adult life."

"I meant how do you know the way?"

"Research?" Seishiro gave him a crooked smile. "I paid her a visit once before she snapped, remember? Didn't you wonder how I got there without your Kamui being alerted about the lift?" He chuckled. "Stick with ghosts, Subaru-kun. You aren't brazen enough to deal with the living."

~::~::~~

## National Diet Building Basement

Seishiro unlocked the emergency exit and closed the door silently behind him. In Hinoto's suite, he did a brief sweep of the room to determine the best spot for the banning field. Removing the stained tatami with the magical circle that Hinoto had used to trap the Ise-girl — and probably the other part of herself —, he got to work.

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29 Yomi, the Japanese word for the underworld in which horrible creatures guard the exits; according to Shinto mythology as related in Kojiki, this is where the dead go to dwell and apparently rot indefinitely. Diyu is the realm of the dead or "hell" in Chinese mythology. Incorporating ideas from Taoism and Buddhism as well as traditional Chinese folk religion, it is a kind of purgatory place; on 18 or more levels, spirits aren't only punished but also renewed to ready for their next incarnation. The concept of Yomi can be sorted into one of the 18 levels.

After clearing the dust from the dais, he began marking the banning circle on the stone underneath, using the thick black permanent marker he'd snatched from the janitor's clipboard on his way down here. Usually, this was done with fuda, but he hadn't bothered to prepare new ones this morning. Adding the last spell, he closed the circle and immediately felt the raised power tingling over his skin. Good. He put the cap onto the marker, slipped it into his pocket and queried his marks. The brief flash would tell Subaru up in the Chamber of Representatives that he had completed his preparations.

The answering tingle in his scars came immediately. Time to play.

He triggered the summoning spell, focused on fire and metal, and a veil slowly formed into the expected shape. Before long, Hinoto-hime was levitating in the center of his banning field, a small, malicious smile on her blood-red lips.

:::You are alive, Sakurazukamori? Doesn't the Sumeragi hold your position now?:::

"He did a poor job." Seishiro shrugged dismissively. "My tree lost weight under his care. So they called me back. The Kamui of the Dragons of Earth sends his thanks—"

The apparition in front of him chuckled evilly. :::I didn't intend to help him.:::

"Side-effect. You did a better job than our own dreamseer."

:::Deluded boy.::: More maniacal laughter. :::Always lurking around, chatting with the other me. As if I couldn't hear, couldn't see—::: The apparition stopped, wavered and the banning field shook under a sudden blow. :::If the Dragons of Earth had won, this place would be flooded. You are all dry.:::

The banning field weakened under her assault. Black talons on delicate white hands reached through, clawing for his face. He flicked his lighter—

°°°Nomaku Sanmanda Bazaradan Senda Makaroshada Sowataya Un Tarata Kanman!°°°<sup>30</sup>

—and sent the mantra right through the flame. Fudo Myo-o's wrathful fires enclosed the banning field, burning through it, engulfing the shrieking apparition in its center...

...flaring high up to the ceiling right beneath the—

Seishiro cursed.

~::~::~~

National Diet Building  
Chamber of Representatives

:::I dreamed your defeat, Sumeragi-san. I dreamed you joined the Dragons of Earth. If you are here now, you—:::

"Whatever the Final Year forced me to become, I am still Sumeragi. My duty as an onmyoji of my clan wasn't taken from me just because something else became my responsibility, too."

The translucent spirit behind the red veils of his banning field seemed to shrink in on itself. :::So the Dragons of Heaven lost...:::

Subaru bent his head, trying to find a way to tell her what she needed to hear to move on without telling a flat-out lie. "The Dragons of Heaven didn't lose the Final Battle. Kamui-san didn't die, but you did. You are deceased. Please be sensible. You can't lawfully be part of this world any more—"

:::If Kamui lives, then my dream became real and—:::

Subaru started when a second shape took form in his banning field — a dark, twisted mirror of Hinoto's ethereal self. The two forms became unfocussed, wavered...

...and merged. The resulting spirit had a nearly palpable form. Subaru quickly reinforced the field's protections, worrying about Seishiro. If Hinoto's dark self was here, it had to have escaped from him, and—

:::Thank you, Sumeragi-san,::: the recombined spirit said with a mental voice that was atypically firm, firmer than Hinoto's had been when she was still alive. :::It is good to know that all our dreams are now real.::: She smiled, fragile yet energetic and deceptively soft. :::I couldn't imagine the Diet's basement being flooded without Japan being submerged first.:::

Subaru froze, his pulse thumping in his chest, but the marks still pressed solidly against his shields. That would be gone if something happened to Seishiro, wouldn't it? He—

:::I will see what the dreams in the other world are like...:::

"Sayonara, Hinoto-hime." He bowed his farewell to the spirit that had been torn for so long and drew a deep, relieved breath when she was gone. "The Diet's basement... Flooded." He shook his head.

"It is," Seishiro's calm voice said behind him. "Not up to the ceiling; more like ankle-deep, but trust me, it's wet."

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30 Fudo Myo-o is one of the "Wrathful Kings of Mystic Knowledge", patron of martial arts, who exudes fire and destroys all karmic hindrances. His mantra means "Homage to the all-pervading Vajras! O Violent One of great wrath! Destroy!" [source: [http://www.aetw.org/jsp\\_fudo\\_my\\_o.htm](http://www.aetw.org/jsp_fudo_my_o.htm)]

Subaru blinked. Something glittered on the parquet at his side. "Seishiro-san, are you dripping on the floor?"

"Calling Fudo Myo-o within a public building has its downsides," Seishiro returned much drier than he obviously was. "It sets off the sprinkler system."

"Yes. I understand and..." Subaru didn't bother to suppress his grin. "Stick with the living, Seishiro-san. You aren't subtle enough to deal with ghosts."

Twenty minutes later, Subaru had sorted his paraphernalia back into his satchel, had folded and carefully wrapped the shikifuku in rice paper, and was now signing the official statements required for government contractors. Seishiro had gone home for dry clothes. Subaru smiled again.

He wondered briefly how Hinoto-hime's spirit was to be classified: 'multiple-component schizoid apparition'? 'Spirit with multiple personalities'? For a moment, he was tempted to write 'nuisance', but settled for 'spiritual manifestation with schizophrenic disorder'. He stamped the document and reached for the next form, titled "Declaration of spiritual safety - (copy 1 of 5)". *I should have ignored the ghost and exorcised the paper trail instead!* Subaru thought grimly.

"We're relieved that you were able to complete your task in time. To think that the election of our new premier could be delayed — or worse: influenced — is unbearable. We had an incident with the sprinkler system in the basement, but the fire department assured that it wouldn't be a problem." Ishido took the filled-out form from Subaru and gave him a new one. "The director of the LDP as the leading faction in the Diet requests you to stay during the session to make sure nothing influences the election."

Subaru stifled a sigh and nodded. "Is it possible to complete the forms there?" he asked and Ishido beamed at him, indicating the stairway to the visitor gallery above the Chamber of Representatives.

Subaru hoped there wouldn't be any more spiritual disturbances. He doubted that he could take on much more today.

Nagata-cho, Tokyo

Streetlights were coming on by the time Subaru finally left the Diet, and the omnipresent neon advertisements in the business districts already bathed the streets in a multitude of colors. He silently wished for less crowded streets, but the evening rush wouldn't cease for hours yet. It hadn't been a surprise that the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party had become the new Prime minister.

Subaru yawned and wished he could just fall into bed; unfortunately, he had to call his grandmother first and explain to her why said bed stood in Sakuragi now. The successful completion of the Diet job wasn't an excuse to postpone the call further. If only he weren't that tired. He—

Thick cloth came over his face, was pulled tight behind his head. Something pricked his neck. Cold heat shot under his skin. Hands gripped him and he struggled, kicked. One of his feet connected. Someone cursed. He couldn't breathe... breathe... he...

...darkness.

## Interregnum 4

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
April 5, 2000 — 22:46

The twelfth head of the Sumeragi sat quietly in her chair and allowed her thoughts to wander while enduring the slight, unavoidable tugging with which her maid Maki combed out her hair before braiding it for the night.

She regretted having an anesthetic used on Subaru-san. It was deplorable etiquette, but considering that he had tapped into the black arts, that he was... *living* with the enemy... a sleeping spell wouldn't have been reliable. Trapanal<sup>31</sup> was. Right now, he was still asleep, but the medic had told her that he would definitely be awake tomorrow morning.

She was appalled about the company, the environment in which she'd found him.

The Sakurazukamori.

The Sakurazukamori's house...

Subaru had been working on the *garden*!

~::~::~~

Edogawa-ku, Tokyo  
Togakushi Shrine  
April 5, 2000 — 22:46

Kamui jerked out of sleep, sweat-soaked, panting. He'd been running for his life from two Sakurazukamori and—

He rubbed his eyes, tired, trying to calm down. The dream had been weird — Subaru telling him it wouldn't hurt because Kamui wasn't legally of age, and then they'd been running up Tokyo Tower towards safety, towards Fuma...

He shivered and hugged his legs close to his chest, resting his forehead against his knees. It was cold in the room and the shadows seemed to be moving, becoming the shapes of his nightmare dancing around him. He was sick of being cold, being lonely. Warmth... Gentleness... he wasn't even sure he knew how that felt; everything seemed to be so far away.

And Subaru was sleeping with the Sakurazukamori. Probably right now.

He eased the door shut behind him and padded, bare-foot, across the room. In the pale light from the unshuttered window, the scar of the dragon claw gleamed silvery on Fuma's cheek. Scar. Fuma.

Kamui knelt at the side of his futon, hugging himself. Fuma's room seemed even colder than his. Any colder and he'd surely see his breath. He couldn't possibly sit here and—

Determinedly, he slipped under the cover, curling up in the warmth.

Fuma stirred against him, murmured something, froze. "Kamui?" he asked in the dark. "Are you nuts!? You shouldn't be here." His voice was tight, scared.

"I don't want to be alone. Even if it's only for a little while..." Kamui murmured. "Do you remember the puppy when we first met?"

"You aren't a puppy, Kamui. You—"

"I don't want to be lonely."

"You're still hurt. What if— if he— I—?"

"M— hm." Kamui snuggled closer against Fuma. "Don't worry. If he shows up, I'll punch him on the nose."

~::~::~~

CLAMP Campus  
University Hospital  
April 5, 2000 — 22:46

Akechi sat at his lab table. His hands, gloved in blue nitrile, were folded in front of his chin, while he looked thoughtfully at the sample. The test was already running. He'd been uneasy when he'd treated Sakurazuka

<sup>31</sup> Trapanal, also known as sodium thiopental, is a rapid-onset short-acting barbiturate general anaesthetic, causing unconsciousness within 30-45 seconds after injection. It is known to have anesthetic, sedative, and hypnotic properties depending on dosage. Side effects include headache, emergence delirium, prolonged somnolence and nausea. The hangover effects may last up to 36 hours.

Seishiro in Imonoyama's house. And now, after seeing him again two days ago, the similarities had become hard to ignore.

Size, eyes, even the wave of the hair and...

Sakurazuka had been tense when Akechi had used the opportunity for a final check-up after treating Shiro-kun; so tense that it had been difficult to palpate the injury at all. The man certainly had issues with being touched, but when Akechi had said as much, he'd become malleable in an instant, revealing a physical control that no common dojo exercise could account for. Akechi should know...

...as well as he knew that it took perseverance to reduce the scarring of an extensive injury this much. And endurance.

Sakurazuka had declined a renewal of the painkiller prescription, and Akechi's inquiry about other drugs — prescribed or not — was met with a shrug and, "Sex and coffee, but I can cut down on the coffee if required."

Akechi had felt tempted to laugh. It was a brand of humor he recognized.

Again, he studied the small vial of blood in the tube holder in front of him. He'd taken the sample saying he'd check for possible infections.

Instead he was running a Y-STR analysis<sup>32</sup> on it. He watched the progress bar on the screen creep towards "complete", then pricked his fingertip and started a second analysis.

~::~::~~

Kasumigaseki-cho, Tokyo  
Sakura Enterprises, Inc.  
April 5, 2000 — 22:46

The conference room was locked; its blinds were drawn, and powerful shiki circled high up in the night sky to avoid surprises. Four wall-mounted monitors showed blurred images of people sitting behind desks resembling Romiro's own; images so blurred that it was impossible to recognize anyone at all. Characters at the bottom of each screen identified the section for which the vague frame was responsible: Hokkaido, Shikoku, Kyushu, and Korea. Sakurazuka Romiro knew that he himself was a blurred image on their screens: one labeled "Honshu". Even though Chigoku and Kinki were controlled by Shikoku, Honshu was the largest section in both size and population, if one discounted the extraterritorial Korea. Unfortunately, this fact didn't give Romiro any additional power within the organization. None.

Sometimes, he wished he'd knew the faces of the others.

Sometimes, he wished sending spells through scrambled telephone lines weren't impossible.

Sometimes...

He drew a deep breath and sent the next screenshot. "As you can see, the timed security scanners within the Diet Building show him with the Sumeragi during the exorcism of Hinoto-hime's spirit and—"

"Is he also listed in the guards' book?" Hokkaido interrupted him briskly.

Romiro blinked. "No, I—"

"Then he was wrapped in illusion. We have no reason to assume he didn't cloak himself from the Sumeragi as well." Several of the others signaled approval.

"He had no reason to be present in the first place!" Romiro protested.

"You forget that the blind dreamseer was an official case of his, Honshu-san," Korea threw in. "The only flaw in his performance is the unresponsiveness during the fourth quarter of 1999, which is excusable given his involvement with the Final Battle. So if this is all you have—"

"I have evidence that he's associating with the Sumeragi again," Romiro hastened to say. "A tracer I sent to him by mail came in contact primarily with Sumeragi magic."

"Which might be an error of the mail system or another feeble attempt by the Sumeragi to spy on us," Shikoku dismissed it. "Both are not our concern. The latter will be taken care of."

"The magic was laced with Sakurazuka's magic. Shikoku-san, you confirmed that the current clan head of the Sumeragi has pentagram scars on his hands. If he's truly marked then—"

Shikoku laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"What if I'm right?" Romiro challenged coldly. "Will you still allow Sakurazuka to flaunt the rules?"

"No," Kyushu said in a calm voice. "But I want to see proof of his involvement with the Sumeragi first. He's too good at his job to be replaced on the basis of a mere suspicion."

~::~::~~

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32 Y-STR Analysis of the DNA allows - among other things - the identification of paternally related males.

Kabuki-cho, Tokyo  
April 5, 2000 — 22:46

"And it is really okay if we move into here?" Arashi asked doubtfully.

"Subaru-san said so," Sorata, looking up the building, hoisted the large duffel bag higher onto his shoulder and fished the key out of his pocket.

The entrance door was plain and the mail boxes embedded next to the door were simple brushed steel, but the names on them were engraved rather than labeled and there was an intercom system between the two rows of bell buttons that Sorata was studying now. "It's on the top floor," he said finally, unlocked the door and held it open for her. "The left apartment."

"I still wished Sumeragi-san had given us something in writing," Arashi said uncomfortably as they entered, their steps echoing in the polished stone hallway. "What if somebody asks us on the way up?"

"We have the key," Sorata shrugged, heading for the stairs. "Besides we can always—"

"—use the elevator," Arashi interrupted him with a small smile, pointing to the door next to the stairs.

She studied the apartment for a long time before she slowly crossed the threshold and even then she didn't go further in, her eyes resting on empty walls and a bare wooden floor. Fine wood, but no comfort. No tatami. No carpet. Nothing but a thin layer of dust disturbed by footprints... and cart wheels? Sorata blinked, then shrugged and was stopped by Arashi's outstretched arm. She slowly went further into the apartment, opened the doors giving into mostly empty rooms. Little furniture, fewer decorations, no personal items.

She stopped in the last door to the right: the bedroom. A ricepaper-wrapped kamidana hung on the south wall; in respectful distance to it was a desk with a fax machine on it. Her eyes followed the telephone cord that curled across the room to the telephone on the floor next to the bed. A planter stood near the balcony door; its only content was a spider's web.

Arashi watched it for a long time. "This isn't the place of the Sumeragi-san we met yesterday," she stated finally.

"But he said—"

"No. This is the place of a man who waited for death." She swallowed. "And was rejected."

"Or moved in with him." Sorata grinned, pushing past her. "I mean, come on, we know that Subaru-san and the Sakurazukamori have a history and after what happened on Rainbow Bridge—" He dropped the heavy duffel onto the floor and looked into the first room. "Hey, I've found the kitchen! Let's have a snack and—" he stopped. Arashi was no longer behind him. "Missy?"

The clap of hands told him where she was. He found her in the right corner room, kneeling in front of the kamidana, using ceremonial matches to light three sticks of incense before bowing her head deeply...

"Are you allowed to pray in front of a somebody else's kamidana?" he asked after she'd clapped her hands again and stood, briefly disturbing the thin threads of smoke emanating from the incense.

"Normally, I wouldn't," she said without looking at him. "But the Sumeragi are the only clan besides the Tenno to call the sun goddess their family kami; and Ise is the main shrine of Amaterasu-no-mikoto. I may no longer be the hidden priestess of Ise, but it wouldn't be right for me to rest under Sumeragi-san's roof without paying my respects to the goddess." She studied the narrow, dusty bed with slightly rumpled covers that stood against the east wall. "I will respect his advice regarding Amaterasu's favors."

"You mean—?"

She nodded. "Tomorrow."

~::~::~~

CLAMP Campus  
University Hospital  
April 6, 2000 — 07:05

The University Hospital was a quiet place this early in the morning. Saiga walked swiftly through almost deserted corridors towards the unmarked room on the fifth floor. Personally, he would have preferred to wait until Shige's kitten had grown stronger and more used to him before leaving the hospital. A collision in the corridor and two afternoon strolls together weren't much. But he had a hunch that they were running out of time fast; and he hadn't survived this long by ignoring that kind of feeling.

His hand on the doorknob, Saiga glanced briefly up and down the corridor. Then he slipped inside, closing the door behind him as quietly as he'd opened it. He crossed over to the bed. Half an hour after the nurse's morning visit the patient was sound asleep again. Well. He wouldn't be sound asleep much longer. "Hey. Wake up."

"Wh—" Startled grey eyes stared up at him.

"It's me." Saiga dropped the backpack onto the foot end of the bed. "You're being released today. I brought you clothes." He nodded towards the backpack. "Put them on, then pack your stuff."

Kakyo sat up and blinked sleepily, his short sleep-mussed hair standing in all directions. He yawned. "Akechi-sensei hasn't released me yet."

"He has. I just have to fill in the date." Saiga took the release forms from his pocket, unfolded them on the table and searched his pockets for Shigetaka's pen. "Use the backpack for your stuff. And hurry. I want to get out of here while we can still disappear in the rush hour traffic."

"There's a mistake." Kakyo, looking over his shoulder at the papers, frowned. "My name is written with the characters for 'fang' and 'dawn', not 'flower' and 'firefly'—"

"And? Flowered firefly fits you." Saiga smirked at the indignant look that comment got him. "By the way, I'd voted to call you 'Hamtarō'<sup>33</sup>, but Shige thinks you look more like a chinchilla than a hamster."

"My last name isn't 'Midori' either!"

Saiga sobered. "Kuzuki Kakyo is on the run. Got that? The blind dreamseer is dead. They need a new one. Are you applying for the position?"

Kakyo paled. "No! I—" He pushed himself up, holding onto the edge of the table for support. "I don't want to be trapped ever again. I—" He shuddered and reached for the backpack with the clothes.

"Then you had better start packing," Saiga said calmly. "Because Midori Kakei-san is going to leave the hospital today."

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
April 6, 2000 — 07:36

She sat next to Subaru's futon most of the night. The guards had called her just after midnight, when his sleep had turned fitful, disturbed by nightmares and who knew what. She'd established a banning field around the bed, strengthened with ofuda specifically calling on Amaterasu's power in the deep of the night.

Subaru was too vulnerable in this state of not-quite-consciousness, drifting in and out of sleep in which he kept calling, begging for the enemy to come, to touch him, hold him, make the dreams stop—

What had the child gone through at the hands of that man? Hidden deep in the wide sleeves of her kimono, her hands formed into fists. She'd sat way too often at his bed because of the Sakurazukamori.

Her eyes rested on the broad band of faded bruises across Subaru's throat. If only she'd seen them the day before, but self-conscious as he was, he'd worn one of those turtlenecks, hiding them. The medic had also hinted at the possibility of more intimate injuries...

If only she'd known earlier. She'd never have left him with that man.

She exchanged the damp cloth on Subaru's forehead for a new one and tried to convince herself that Subaru's deathly pallor wasn't due to the Trapanal. But he'd looked so well yesterday, better than any other time she'd seen him in recent years — which had been seldom enough. And he seemed to be eating. Maybe fighting for a cause as important as the fate of Japan had brought that self-consideration about. Maybe...

...maybe she was deluding herself. She thought of the scandalous way her grandson had touched the Sakurazukamori, had allowed the Sakurazukamori to touch him, to—

In front of her, Subaru suddenly choked and she hurried to support his head and shoulders during the painful retching. If she'd known the Trapanal caused this, she'd never have agreed to it being used on him.

Subaru shrank away from her, pulling his shaking hands close to himself. "Don't touch me! I—" He glared at her with wide, feverish eyes that swiftly clouded again as he fell back into disturbed sleep. "Seish...."

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33 Hamtarō is a kiddie cartoon hamster.



## 12 — Summer Storm

*It had sensed Sei-chan's disquiet about the lack of information coming from the marks even before he had tapped into its powers to reinforce his query. At first, it hadn't been much more than an occasional itch, but in the depth of the night, it had turned into a burn searing enough to consume flesh. The pain itself wasn't important; the crippling of his hands was. And so he had come in the absolute dark before dawn, wrapped in black leather and surrounded by the sick red glow of Sumeragi magic.*

*The Tree couldn't protect its Sakurazukamori from the injuries inflicted upon him by Amaterasu's gift, but it repaired the damage as fast as it occurred and for that it dug deep into the power stored after his last successful kill.*

*Something special, Sei-chan had answered that day when it had asked him what he would gain by marking the Sumeragi.*

*He will suffer, it had told him after the Sumeragi's marks had been cut into his hands. As will you.*

*A strong twig, thickly cushioned with blossoms, moved tentatively along Sei-chan's cheek. They had both been right.*

The room was dim, almost dark when Subaru woke up with a headache throbbing in the rhythm of his pulse. Faint voices were coming from a distance. The radio...

Seishiro must have closed the blinds after getting up to make breakfast—

Subaru's stomach turned at the thought of food. For a brief moment he just lay there fighting the sickness and pain. Exhausted, he laid an arm across his eyes. Eating, moving... didn't seem to be good ideas just now. He must have made a mistake with the marks — a bad one — to end up feeling like this. It would also explain the painful, persistent whispers, impressions that didn't make sense.

"...flight JAL175 to Kansai International Airport is now ready for boarding on..."

...polished stones under the leather soles of his shoes...

...the swish of an unbuttoned coat...

Subaru shivered, half-awake, half-asleep. He had to be dreaming again. He wanted to touch Seishiro, to hold on to him to erase the pain, the hunger, to separate dream from reality, his reality from Seishiro's dreams.

"Your ticket, please..."

Subaru blindly reached for Seishiro's pillow, a small substitute for the real thing, and found a hard surface instead. He moved his hand cautiously, felt the distinct texture of fine tatami mats under his fingertips. Tatami? Since when...? A faint scraping beside him made him turn his head; a shoji was opened and—

"Subaru-san. It's good to finally see you awake."

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
April 6, 2000 — 08:51

Subaru stared at Sumeragi Hamamatsu's relieved face. Dim, uneasy light filtered through the shoji decorated with protective ofuda. He pressed his hurting hands against his head, trying to remember. Yesterday... the Diet job. Had something gone wrong with it? It had been dark when he'd finally left the Diet Building. In the evening rush hour the streets had been full of people and—

He raised a slightly shaking hand to feel his neck and found a small adhesive plaster. He hadn't made a mistake with the marks. He'd been—

—brought to Kyoto.

Kyoto. He imagined Seishiro's scars becoming ugly red marks, blistered and torn, and almost choked at the vision of long elegant hands being blackened, burned, destroyed to the bone. Holding frantically on to his shields, he pushed the desperate wish to query his marks out of his mind. He couldn't risk turning the nightmare into reality. He had to return to Tokyo, to Seishiro before he lost his hold on the marks. Now. He struggled to sit up, to get to his knees, his feet—

The ground raced past under him, fell away—

"Subaru-san!" Hamamatsu caught him and prevented him from falling. "You shouldn't attempt to get up yet. You haven't fully recovered!" He helped him to sit back down. "I will send for Sumeragi-dono immediately."

The room had stopped spinning by the time the shoji opened again, allowing his grandmother to roll into the room. "Subaru-san," she greeted him with a polite nod. "I know this must be rather surprising for you, but—"

"Seishiro?" he asked, fighting against dizziness and pain.

"Don't worry about the Sakurazukamori." His grandmother actually reached for his hand, held it like she'd done so often when he'd been a small child. She'd stopped doing that when he'd had to wear the gloves... after Seishiro marked him. "You're safe. You'll—"

"Safe?" He snatched his hand out of her grip, cradling it in his lap. "I was safe in Tokyo. Here—" He shook his head. The pressure of the marks was crushing him. If that didn't stop soon, he'd be— He buried his exploding head in his hands, pleading, "Obaa-sama, I *need* him, I—"

"Subaru-san. You don't know what you're saying." She folded her hands in her lap and studied him sternly. "Rest some more. You aren't quite yourself at the moment. Hamamatsu-kun will make sure you aren't disturbed." She frowned. "I expect you in my rooms once you've refreshed yourself."

Subaru stared at the shoji for a long time after it had been closed behind her. Then he slowly, methodically got back to his feet, pointedly ignoring Hamamatsu's offered hand. As long as he kept a hand to a wall, he should be fine. As long as he kept focused, concentrated on his shields, Seishiro should be fine, too, which gave him a little time to deal with his grandmother and through her with the elders and the rest of his house. Then he could go home—

He stopped. He was home, wasn't he? This was his clan's main estate. *Home*. Subaru tested the word in his mind and realized he'd meant it. Sometime over the last three months, home had become a place with toast and miso, coffee and tea, the melodious singing of the dead and an off-key hum to the radio in the morning. It had become a place overgrown with weeds and invaded by an oversized cat.

Home meant discussions, arguments, threats, laughter...

...and more often than not an undemanding silence Subaru hadn't known existed.

Home...

...was no longer Kyoto. He stumbled and Hamamatsu steadied him immediately; Subaru batted his hand aside. "I have to go," he told him calmly. "Please don't get in my way."

~::~::~~

Osaka Prefecture

Kansai International Airport

10:16

Seishiro pressed his hand against his right ear, trying to block out some of the din on the crowded platform. He didn't have much time; his train was already announced. He heard the call going out. Once. Twice. Thr—

=Sakura Enterprises, Osaka Office. Fujiwara speaking,= a cold, feminine voice said on the other end.

"Michiko? Seishiro." He imagined her sitting at her desk, nyloned legs crossed, business costume immaculate. She'd always been good at details. And deadly.

=Where are you?= There was a brief interruption when she checked her display. =Kansai International!?= The sound of a kitten heel hitting carpeted floor.

"Public phone," he confirmed, knowing he had her complete attention now.

=What do you need?= she asked.

"A car. Untracked. Off the books."

=Your usual?=  
"Fast. With Kyoto license plates at Shin-Osaka in 50 minutes."

Behind him, his train thundered into the station. He had no time left. =Luggage locker 64. And Seishiro...= There was a brief pause; she was calculating what price she could demand for her favor. =...one day I'm going to ask.=

"Understood." She'd let him off easy. "Thank you." He hung up and ran to catch his train.

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)

Sumeragi Family Residence

10:16

Subaru entered his grandmother's room with an unhappy Hamamatsu on his heels. His stomach was still upset, and the perfect quiet of the house was filled with the din of countless voices heard elsewhere. He was running out of time. Fast.

"Subaru-san." His grandmother nodded politely at him, indicating the sitting cushion opposite her own. Behind them, Hamamatsu silently took his post next to the door. "Maki, please bring my tea set." She turned her attention back towards Subaru. "I didn't expect you so soon."

"The matter doesn't allow for delay, grandmother," he answered equally calm. What he had to tell her wasn't going to be easy. "It will only become worse."

She studied him, obviously considering his last comment. The shoji at their side was open, revealing the stone garden. It was late morning; the sunlight still drew small blue shadows towards sunset on the combed white sand. In their place Subaru saw curled green fronds over muddy black earth and tried to push the image of Seishiro's crippled hands from his thoughts. Maki returned with the tea set. She set it down in front of his grandmother, bowed again and, on a subtle move of his grandmother's hand, slipped back out the room, closing the shoji behind her.

His grandmother poured the tea and Subaru concentrated on taking the offered bowl with steady fingers; he only pretended to sip from it, silently wishing for a lukewarm coffee and one of Seishiro's painkillers to go with it. Or for Seishiro. Or both. His temples throbbed...

"So, you called the Dao together with the Sakurazukamori?"

"Yes." He put the bowl down and caught his grandmother frowning at him. "It was necessary."

"We noticed the renewal." She nodded. "But we believed it to be due to the victory of the Dragons of Heaven. It didn't occur to us that you might have abandoned the Dragons of Heaven to conjoin yours and your enemy's power."

"The Dao needs two sources," Subaru reminded her. "He is the only trained onmyoji of similar strength in Japan. There was no choice. The mass superstitions around 1999 and the end of the Millennium flawed the process of the Final Year, turning it into a fight of life and death. A decision under those conditions ends existence, independent of the winner. We had to stop it."

"And risk Japan's spiritual stability by keeping it undecided ever since."

"Spiritual stability means a balance between the forces of yin and yang," Subaru said tiredly. "If Kamui had killed his Twin Star, then Heaven would have killed the Earth, but can there be a heaven if there's no earth underneath to define it?"

It left her silent for a long time. The tea was cooling between them. The birds had fallen silent outside and the humming of midday insects over the bright sand now took their place. Subaru worked hard to maintain his shields, not to pay attention to the whispers in his ears and the taste of cheap coffee filling his mouth. He almost slumped in relief when his grandmother finally nodded slowly. "Your point is valid," she conceded.

~::~::~~

Osaka Prefecture  
Shin-Osaka railway station  
11:09

Michiko hadn't bothered to tell him the key-code; Seishiro hadn't bothered to ask. His opening spell for locker 64 was a negligible effort and the content consisted of car keys, papers issued to his name and a pink stick-it note reading:

*East Parking Lot. Slot 36. There's a surprise in the glove compartment. Love, M.*

Normally that would have deterred him from even looking at the car, but he couldn't afford the time it would take to get a rental car at short notice. The Tree's supportive protection was already wearing thin; he felt the pain in his hands becoming more intense by the minute. Subaru was running out of time, and so was he.

Seishiro took the papers and keys and followed the signs towards the parking lot. Besides, Michiko was one of the few people he was willing to give the benefit of the doubt; she had equally much to lose.

Slot 36 held a black Mazda Roadster which he immediately checked for spells and other snares. When he found none, Seishiro unlocked the car and slipped behind the wheel. Normally, he preferred larger models, but it was a fast, reliable car and he wouldn't need it for long. The 'surprise' in the glove compartment turned out to be an unregistered 9 mm Sig-Sauer SAS in an executive holster, and two spare magazines taped together with another pink stick-it note:

*Even you can't carry on a flight. Good luck. M.*

He checked the gun and the magazines twice, before shrugging out of his jacket and slipping on the harness. After clipping the support strap to his belt, he adjusted the hold of the gun for a fast draw, put his jacket back on and started the engine.

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
11:28

"Calling the Dao is in itself an astonishing feat. One that deserves deep respect," his grandmother acknowledged with a small nod. "However, your prolonged stay with the Sakurazukamori is unacceptable. There is no reason for the sources of the Dao to remain together once the Dao was called."

Subaru drew a deep breath. "The Dao demands symmetry in its sources."

"At the time of the call, but not afterwards, Subaru-san."

"Yes, but it enforces the symmetry." He slowly stretched out his hands in front of him and showed her the pentagram scars. "I've been wearing Seish—the Sakurazukamori's marks since I was nine. For sixteen years, a fragment of his magic has been embedded in me." He noticed her surprise and added, "That's how they work and the Dao—"

"Are you telling me a piece of your magic lies now within the Sakurazukamori?"

"Yes. Sakurazuka Seishiro has been bearing my marks since we called the Dao." Claspng his elbows, he added, "I had no conscious part in placing them, but it is my magic. It is calling me, constantly telling me about that other—"

"Nonsense!" she interrupted him sharply. "Don't you see that it's just one of his tricks, an illusion to keep you tied to him?"

"Grandmother, it gets stronger with increasing distance. No illusion does that. At the beginning that *trick* brought me to my knees if I went just a few meters away from him; Kyoto is *five-hundred kilometers* from Tokyo. I'm already fighting just to keep focused. If I fail—" He shuddered; the image of charred, destroyed hands was back. "I have to go back. I—"

"You've worn the marks of the Sakurazukamori since you were a child and he never came crawling to your doorstep because they hurt him." She aligned the bowls on the lacquer tablet meticulously. "You've been under his influence far too long. It isn't surprising that you can't think straight after his abuse."

"I'm not influenced," Subaru protested. "And I wasn't abused. The marks—"

"Not influenced? Not abused? You called him in your sleep! In Tokyo, you were all but spreading your legs for him right in front of me!"

"Because you drugged me and brought me to Kyoto and the marks are killing me that far away from him! Because I was nearly unconscious after dropping my shields to keep you from turning the garden into a battlefield. I'd have hit the ground there and then if he hadn't caught me. I assure you, there was no abuse."

"The bruises on your body and your fixation on our enemy suggest otherwise," his grandmother corrected him. "I can only hope that the rape didn't damage your spiritual integrity beyond repair." She sighed and her face softened a little. "It's not the first time that the Sakurazukamori tampered with your mind. I'm sure you'll see my point once you remember."

"I do remember, grandmother," Subaru retorted icily. "Every detail. And once and for all: *I wasn't raped!* I have gone Within rape victims. Believe me, I know the difference!"

There was no chance that he hadn't been heard outside. His grandmother's face was an expressionless mask when she finally asked coldly: "Subaru-san, are you telling me that you had consensual sexual intercourse with the murderer of your sister?"

He looked at her shock, her disdain, her manners that allowed her to say these to her most outrageous things in a calm, unperturbed voice — and he had enough of it, of etiquette, of traditions meant only for the clan and never for its people.

He met her eyes squarely. "Yes. And I enjoyed it."

The silence that followed his words was absolute. It lasted, expanded, seemed to enclose everything, until a faint rustle of his grandmother's kimono shattered it when she hid her hands in her sleeves. "I don't believe we have anything more to discuss." Her voice was strangely brittle. "Your disregard of propriety has grown beyond any proportion."

"Has it?" Subaru returned wearily. "Or is it propriety itself that has grown out of proportion? We are the ones who decide what is right and wrong, good and evil with our norms of what is to be and what isn't. But who judges us? Who assesses the rules? Why is what I do any better than what the Sakurazukamori does?"

"He's influenced you beyond reason. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Really? If a young woman is happy with the ghost she summoned to her side, why should I rid her of her happiness by sending him on?"

"Because it is the right thing to do." There was pity in her eyes when she answered his question in the patient voice with which she'd taught him the arts as a child. "It isn't right for that ghost to be forced to stay among the living."

But he was no longer a child. "There are ghosts who want, even beg, to stay and watch over those they hold dear. Still I have to force them to move on." He stood and, turning his back to her, looked at the now

sun-flooded stone garden outside. "Without asking them, I judge their existence." He hesitated, his hand cramped around the frame of the shoji. "What I do with ghosts, Seishiro-san does with people."

"That makes him a murderer."

Subaru stared blindly into the sun glare. "What does it make me?"

He didn't expect an answer. Pain throbbed behind his eyes, radiating out, down his spine into his limbs, his joints. He had to return to Tokyo; through her if necessary. He'd have collapsed already if the pressure of the marks weren't abating—

Abating. Subaru froze. Seishiro was close! He withstood the temptation to query the marks and find out just how close. He was too worn to risk it; instead, he tapped spiritually into the wards protecting the estate. His wards. His protections. There were those of his grandmother, too; those were older and renewed more frequently, but his were the stronger, the more precise ones. Warily he laid a mental tendril onto the protective net they formed around the estate and wove his presence into them. Even that little magic had his marks screaming at him. He felt sweat forming on his skin...

There was a first tug, Seishiro's first cautious query. Subaru caught the alarm, silenced it, opened his wards to welcome the intruder as a guest not to be noticed. He dared not to think about the fact that he was opening the main estate of his clan for their enemy, exposing all those depending on him to the Sakurazukamori. Seishiro had no choice, *he* had no choice.

A second tug. Seishiro was nearing the main house. If he ran into somebody, if he killed— Subaru slowly released the shoji frame, concentrating on each finger before he turned to face his grandmother. "You're right," he admitted with a formal bow. "I don't know what I'm talking about — and neither do you. This discussion is pointless. I'll leave you to your thoughts."

"We aren't finished here, Subaru-san," she stopped him. "Your spiritual integrity—"

"Is not your concern, whereas given that I am head of the clan, yours is mine," he stated flatly. "I won't jeopardize your integrity with my presence any longer." He nodded at her. "Goodbye, grandmother." Hamamatsu blocked his path. "Let me pass," Subaru demanded.

"He won't," his grandmother said with just a hint of regret in her voice behind him. "This folly with our—the Sakurazukamori has gone long enough. You damage the honor of the house and we cannot tolerate it any longer. The clan—"

"I am the head of this clan." Subaru turned back to her. "And I am leaving."

"You aren't master of your senses," his grandmother declared. "You showed that clearly enough. You don't know what you do or want and—"

"I want to leave." Plain. Straight-forward, almost bleak in pronunciation. He wouldn't give her another chance to dispute his sanity.

"You can't." The two words held conviction and a finality which made Subaru want to scream. "Hamamatsu will escort you to your rooms."

"I don't think so," a calm voice said from the door.

Subaru watched his grandmother's pale, shocked expression, noticed her hands clawing into the seam of her sitting cushion. He didn't have to turn. He knew that Seishiro was standing in the door, one arm casually propped at shoulder height against the ancient wood, a gleaming cigarette between deceptively slack fingers, seemingly at ease — but no doubt the burning tobacco was close to his lips. He spotted a movement in the corner of his eye; Hamamatsu was reaching for—

"No!" Subaru snapped in a voice of command he seldom used. "Don't! I forbid it!"

"Suba—"

Seishiro's hand wiped over Hamamatsu's face and the tall man crumbled against the wall and down to the floor; out like a light. Seishiro used his foot to nudge open Hamamatsu's jacket. "Armed," he noted, "but no onmyoji." He looked at Subaru. "Ready?"

Subaru nodded, his attention on his grandmother. She was more dangerous. If she fought, he'd have to take sides once and for all. She knew that, but he wasn't sure she knew that there was only one side he could take.

"I will leave," he told her, walking slowly towards Seishiro, towards the now open door. If he didn't move too fast, he might stay on his feet. "It is up to you to decide how final it will be." He stopped barely a step away from Seishiro, rested a hand against the door post, and looked back at his grandmother's suddenly frail form, aware that the wheelchair was out of her reach. "It's not as easy as you may think," he told her quietly. "Please find it in your heart to believe me."

"Subaru-san!" her voice rang after him.

This time, he didn't turn.

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)

12:46

Seishiro kept his prey in sight from the moment they left the immediate vicinity of the Sumeragi estate. There was a JR railway station within walking distance, though not one served by the Shinkansen if he recalled correctly. Subaru might be able to confirm that, but he didn't look as if he was still paying attention to directions. The east wind coming down from Mount Hiei was chillingly cold, yet there was a sheen of sweat on Subaru's face which made Seishiro doubt that he could get them back to Tokyo today. Maybe if they drove, but there wasn't a chance that Subaru's spiritual signature on a Mori car would go undetected.

He'd put power into the sleeping spells to make sure that even somebody as gifted as Subaru's grandmother would need time to unravel them, and he was scattering their spiritual signatures thoroughly, but any serious spell would bring the Sumeragi onto their trail and probably draw the attention of the Mori as well. The former would be unpleasant, the latter probably deadly, and he was tiring fast now.

In Tokyo, he'd been tapping deeply into the Tree's power to ease the worst effects of their separation, otherwise his hands wouldn't be usable now. But Subaru had been on his own and unfettered marks tried to synchronize even vital functions, resulting in hyperventilation and tachycardia — and ultimately in cardiogenic shock when the body couldn't cope with the strain any longer.

So far, it looked as if Subaru had managed to hold on to his shields, but the sudden relief from the strain was almost as dangerous as the strain itself. Right now, they were taking pains not to touch each other, but they both knew they couldn't keep that up for long...

The next train to Kyoto Station was crowded, which helped to hide their signatures but also forced them to remain standing. It was a commuter train; at this time of day filled with housewives and their shopping bags, mothers and small children, and an assortment of tourists.

The car jerked when the train rattled over a switch. Subaru stumbled against him, fell— Seishiro caught him around the waist. Subaru moaned faintly, clumsily tugging at his shirt.

"You're drunk," Seishiro observed calmly.

"From you..." Subaru's voice was slurred. "You... 're like heavy wine... deep red..." He buried his face in Seishiro's shirt, breathing him in. "...goin' straight to the head..."

Seishiro steadied him. "Actually, I've been taught to go straight for the heart," he said dryly, aware of the space the surrounding passengers suddenly managed to give them. "You're going to stay on your feet, right?"

"U...huh?" Subaru mumbled, stubbornly trying to reach bare skin.

Seishiro caught his hands at the wrists to rescue his shirt from being pulled out of his pants and silenced the sobbed protest by weaving the fingers of his left hand through Subaru's. He pressed their hands firmly against his waist and glanced at the info board. It was still roughly fifteen minutes to Kyoto station. The Shinkansen was out of the question now; Subaru would never make it to Tokyo like this. Probably if they got a green class compartment, but he'd have to pull rank to get one without reservation and that wouldn't go unnoticed with the Mori. No, they'd have to get a hotel room and weather it there.

Shimogyo-ku, Kyoto

Hotel Granvia Kyoto

13:11

Subaru had begun to shiver violently by the time their train arrived at the station. Seishiro wrapped him into his coat and laid an arm around his shoulders, effectively masking Subaru's state from casual onlookers while steering him across the station. It was the quiet hour after midday and the wide stairs and escalators leading up to the entrance of the hotel above Kyoto Station were deserted.

The Granvia's door guard threw them a questioning look as Seishiro led Subaru towards the wide-swung entrance doors. A business man arriving without luggage and accompanied by a younger, obviously intoxicated man wasn't the kind of guest a four-star establishment would want to be known for.

Seishiro crossed the large lobby as fast as Subaru's condition allowed, heading straight for the reception counter.

"Good day, sir. Welcome at the Granvia." The receptionist bowed politely. "May I ask if you have reservations?"

"No, this is a trip on shortest notice." Seishiro sighed, steadying Subaru more firmly against his side. "Junior employees..." He shook his head and smiled, putting his credit card on the counter. "Sakurazuka Seishiro. You should find me in your customer registry. I'd like to have my usual suite if possible. And hurry, please."

The receptionist examined the card briefly before entering it in the card reader and calling up the customer profile. "Sakurazuka-sensei." He indicated the row of small desks set up for arriving guests to fill out the check-in forms. "Please be so kind as to take a seat and—"

Seishiro ignored the request. "Copy the data from the last time and send the files up. I'll sign them later." Subaru groaned, trying to hide from the bright lights against his side. "If an Executive suite isn't available, I take one of the twin Semis." Seishiro laid a hand over Subaru's eyes. "Just make sure it's quiet."

"But—"

"Do you offer a medical service?" Seishiro inquired.

"Yes, if your... associate needs assistance—"

"No, that won't be necessary, but I need a packet of Acetaminophen as fast as possible. If you could take care of that and deliver it to my room together with two pots of strong coffee I'd be most grateful, thank you."

"I'll see to it immediately and you'll find a ready-to-use coffee maker in your suite, sir."

"I'd prefer it delivered," Seishiro said. He didn't exactly have his hands free to make coffee.

"Yes, sir. It will be sent up immediately." The receptionist's face was schooled to a mask of attentive blankness. "You'll find descriptions of our additional services in your suite. If you need anything else, don't hesitate to call us. We hope you'll have a nice stay."

"I'm sure we will." Seishiro nodded politely.

The two topmost floors were reserved for high-profile guests. The glossy dark-brown marble of the corridor floor complemented the bamboo-themed walls and reflected the warm light coming from balloon lamps adorning them in regular intervals. The decor made the secret application of a spell or a fuda in the corridors almost impossible — one of the reasons Seishiro had chosen the Granvia before.

They'd been given the semi suite farthest from the lift and the attendant held the door for them before handing key card and info material to Seishiro, who declined the common tour of the suite: He ordered the blinds closed against the sun outside and dismissed the man.

Honey colored carpet sucked the noise from the large room once the door had closed. Seishiro left it unlocked for the room service. Subaru was almost unconscious when he sat him down on the wide bed and unwrapped him from the coats. Using the opportunity to check on temperature and pulse, he found Subaru's skin cool under the slight sheen of sweat. Good, they'd escaped a serotonin intoxication, otherwise the body temperature would have risen already. He checked pulse and breathing rhythm: fleeting and too shallow. *Barely escaped*, he concluded.

Room service knocked, and Seishiro went to get the tray of coffee and leave an order not to be disturbed no matter what. He put the tray on the bedside table and locked the door. After pulling off Subaru's boots, he kicked off his own shoes — everything else would have to wait. He tossed two pillows against the headboard to settle against it, then undid a few of his shirt buttons and pulled Subaru into his lap, setting his unresponsive hands onto bare skin.

For a brief moment, Seishiro allowed himself to just bathe in the relief the intimate contact brought for the aching burns on his hands... but he couldn't risk falling asleep. He reached across his prey for tray and remote control on the bedside table and poured himself a coffee, before reducing brightness and sound on the TV. Subaru murmured something, moving unconsciously in his lap and Seishiro ran his free hand soothingly through Subaru's sweat-damp hair, trying to move him away from his groin, while zapping through the numerous channels. One showed a repetition of Shurayukihime. He dropped the remote and reached for his cup. The shoulder strap of the holster under his jacket cut into his skin. It was going to be a long wait.

Six hours later, Seishiro heard the electronic lock clicking faintly, just before two armed men burst into the suite, stormed through the small lounge area and took position at opposite corners of the foot end of the bed, weapons directed at his chest.

Seishiro quirked a brow at them. The chance to spellstop a projectile increased dramatically with the distance in which the shot was fired; two meters plus was more than enough. The real danger was the old woman entering behind them. The fuda in her hand glowed an unnatural white. A stout black-capped grey bird sat on the back of her wheelchair, its red eyes unwaveringly trained on Seishiro. A night heron was officially still a 'white creature', but on the verge of being a predator. He was sure it was the reason they'd been found that fast.

"What have you done to my grandson this time?" Lady Sumeragi demanded. Subaru winced at her icy tone and snuggled closer against his left side.

"I did nothing," Seishiro stated, laying a firm hand onto the small of Subaru's back to keep him down. "It's not my fault that the Dao perfected the symmetry—" Subaru moaned when he raised his left hand to show her the still glowing pentacle on its back. "—without including the manual." The gunman he'd put to sleep at the estate made a threatening step towards him; the heron spread its wings. Subaru's grandmother stopped them.

"You don't believe I would fall for that absurd lie you fed my grandson, do you?"

"A lie?" Seishiro resumed his hold on Subaru's back, eliciting a contended murmur from his prey. Lady Sumeragi was watching him closely, concentrating on his lips, obviously prepared to counter any spell he might try.

"Unfortunately not." The Sig wasn't a spell; in one swift move he drew and aimed at Subaru's head. With a hoarse cry the heron took flight, the guards—

"Try it," he barked, stopping them in their tracks, "if you want to find out what a plated 9 mm hollow tip round does to his face!" The assaulting shiki fluttered as a fuda onto the crumpled cover.

"Which might end existence if your claim about the Dao holds true," Subaru's grandmother reminded him with cold irony.

"And I don't care if I go down myself." Seishiro kept the Sig pointed at Subaru's head, trigger half-pulled. "Check the marks," he ordered her. "Only the marks. Don't even think of trying anything else; *you* aren't fast enough to stop a bullet at a hand's length."

Her spiritual touch wasn't more than a whisper, the briefest contact before she recoiled and stared at him. But then, he'd known the Sumeragi were good at personal magic. Subaru's gift had to have come from somewhere. He silently watched the old woman rebuilding her composure.

"Young man, I do believe that we have something to discuss."

"Indeed," he confirmed with a cautious nod. "But not with your goons in my bedroom."

She considered that, then: "Hamamatsu, Shigeru. Wait outside."

"But Sumeragi-dono—" the former protested. "We can't possibly—"

"You can walk out that door or sleep on the carpet," Seishiro said sweetly. "You might even wake up again." He dropped the sweetness. "Or not."

"Wait. Outside." Lady Sumeragi repeated coldly without taking her eyes from him, for once truly assessing him. "I'll be all right. Make sure we are not disturbed."

This time they obeyed. "Yes, madam."

Seishiro de-cocked the gun and returned it to its holster after the door had closed behind them. Lady Sumeragi's attention turned to her grandson, whose legs were slung tightly around Seishiro's, unconsciously clinging to him. "This is—" She shook her head, lost for words. "How did this happen?" she asked finally. "What was your intention?"

"Nothing." Seishiro sighed. "Frankly, we didn't even intend to call the Dao. We just tried to stop two braindead kids from destroying the world thanks to some exceedingly stupid superstitions based on a misunderstood calendar system." He tried in vain to find a more comfortable position with Subaru curled against him. "The feud between our clans is fourteen hundred years old. There is no information about what happens when your brand of onmyodo and mine are used in unison."

"Certainly not," she agreed. "Why did you come for him?"

"If one of us dies now, we don't know if the Final Battle will continue or not, or if it will continue to be flawed or revert to what it was supposed to be. I'm sworn to protect Japan. Would you take that risk?"

~::~::~~

..."If I were to start a war among our clans in your house, Sumeragi-san, did you really think I'd waste my time with the peasants?" ... "might have helped convince me of your sincerity if you hadn't prevented Subaru-san from contacting us." — "Prevented? I told him to call you." ... "Don't blame me for his stubbornness. That trait of his certainly isn't my fault." ... "Subaru-san has been in such a condition before, hasn't he?" — "In the beginning. The symptoms increase with distance and time of separation. Tokyo-Kyoto could have been deadly."...

The voices were blurred, no rhythm, no sense, pounding his head endlessly, then a grainy and bitter liquid was dripped between his lips and somebody held his mouth closed, stroking his throat to make him swallow. His head was raised slightly; a strong hand supported his nape, while a cup was held to his lips.

"Swallow," Seishiro commanded and lukewarm coffee flowed over his tongue, washing the remaining crumbs into his stomach. He tried to turn his face away and Seishiro laid a hand over his eyes and forced another sip down his throat. "Tell me in time if you need a bowl. I didn't bring luggage. If you decorate these pants, you're in trouble."

"I'm sorry. I don't..."

"I know." The bed made a sickening jump when Seishiro reached over and put the cup on the bedside table. "The analgesic will take effect soon."

"What happened?" Subaru whispered, laying his arm across his eyes to block the blinding light that seeped even through his closed lids.

"You don't remember?" Seishiro sounded hurt. "And here I had the night of my life with you—"

"Don't—"

"Subaru-san, are you feeling better now?"



He shot straight up at the concerned voice and would have doubled over had Seishiro not caught him. "Grandmother..." She sat in her wheelchair, on the other side of a small coffee table that had been pushed against the side of the bed.

"I told you I had the night of my life," Seishiro said dryly, steadying him.

Subaru batted his hand aside and swallowed against the nausea, leaning his aching forehead against Seishiro's shoulder for a moment.

"Subaru-san?" his grandmother inquired, concerned.

He gathered himself up as best he could. "I'm fine," he answered, trying to distance himself from Seishiro but failing.

"And you call *me* a liar," Seishiro commented.

"You don't have to suffer for my benefit, Subaru-san," grandmother said in a calm voice. "As undesirable as the situation is, I am aware that this isn't your fault."

Subaru stared at her. "How—?"

Seishiro shrugged. "We had ample time to talk. They kicked in the door yesterday evening."

"We did nothing of the sort."

"No, the hotel management just had to replace the lock after your arrival."

"Please!" Subaru cut in, pressing his palms against his temples. "I can't stand this yet. I—" He ignored his throbbing head and slipped his legs over the edge of the bed under the table. "I need coffee."

Fifteen minutes and three cups of strong coffee later Subaru closed the bathroom door behind him, leaning against it for a moment to orientate himself in the elegant yet functional room — and to recover from the mad scene of Seishiro pouring tea for his grandmother.

Two white yukata with the hotel's logo in gold embroidery lay together with an assortment of toiletries and two stacks of fluffy white towels in an immaculate cabinet next to the sink. Taking a seat on the thickly upholstered stool in front of it, he began removing his clothes, finding his fingers annoyingly clumsy at first. When he was done he studied his reflection in the wide mirror covering the wall above the sink. Startled, he ran a cautious hand over his narrow cheek, tentatively touching the deep shadows under his eyes and the again clearly visible ribs. He had to have lost at least ten kilograms in the last two days. If this had happened a few weeks earlier...

He shivered and stepped into the shower stall. Seishiro's hands had looked fine and it hadn't felt as if there was serious harm, but there was no way to say how much of that was illusion. Seishiro wouldn't reveal any weakness as long as grandmother was around.

Subaru adjusted the water temperature to medium warmth and squeezed shower gel into his palm.

He returned to the main room of the suite ten minutes later. Freshly showered and wrapped tightly in a yukata, he finally felt a little more alive than dead. Not that it helped much with the feeling of dread created by his grandmother sharing a breakfast table with Seishiro. Or the two of them being in the same room... building... city to begin with. Talking. *About him.*

*Talk about scary,* Subaru thought and pulled one of the small armchairs over to sit at the front of the table.

"I've sent Shigeru-kun back to the estate to report to the elders and express your regrets about your hasty departure," she told him as he reached for a dry slice of toast. "I assume you won't come back with me there."

"I would," Subaru said quietly. "But not alone, and I fear you would object to my guest." He nibbled at his toast and waited to see if it stayed down. Underneath the table, he rested his ankle against Seishiro's. Warmth. Strength. For a brief moment, he just indulged himself, relaxing his shields, easing the pressure—

"Subaru-san, are you listening?" his grandmother asked with a frown.

Seishiro chuckled into his coffee and Subaru kicked against his shin with a socked foot, stubbing his toe in the process. "I'm sorry, grandmother," he answered demurely. "I'm still not quite myself. What were you saying?"

"I'm dismayed that you didn't inform me about the situation. Why did I have to learn the truth from your enemy?"

"I tried to tell you. You didn't believe me." He stopped and looked from Seishiro, who was seemingly carefree sipping his coffee, back to his grandmother. "But why did you believe him?"

Seishiro raised his hand and showed him the scars. "Let's say I had the evidence at hand."

A sharp knock interrupted them. Hamamatsu entered and bowed. "Please excuse the disturbance, Sumeragi-dono, but there's a gentleman from the hotel insisting on seeing... *him.*" He nodded briskly towards Seishiro, who tossed his napkin onto the table and stood, not without running his hand languorously over Subaru's shoulder in passing. He arched a brow at Hamamatsu.

"The name's Sakurazuka. Give it a try; it's not that complicated, Ham-chan." He opened the door.

"You will return to his house?" his grandmother asked quietly, observing Seishiro, who talked briefly with an employee in the open door before being handed a gold printed document folder.

"It's not as if I have a choice," Subaru replied, closing his mouth on the 'And even if I had one...' that followed.

Seishiro skimmed the content of the folder, then took the offered pen and signed it. He handed it all back with a polite nod and closed the door.

"We have the room for an additional four hours. Reception will take care of reserved seats on a Shinkansen back to Tokyo this afternoon," he told Subaru while reaching for his coat.

"Where are you going?" Subaru asked warily.

"Isetan. I won't spend three hours on a train in sweaty underwear." Seishiro studied him briefly. "It's about five hundred meters. Can you manage that?"

"Surely Subaru-san—"

"Yes," Subaru nodded slowly. "If you don't take too long. I'm still receiving from you."

"I'll make it short. Special wishes for yours?"

Subaru blinked. "Sorry?"

"That yukata looks good on you, but I doubt JR would consider it appropriate attire for a train ride. We might try a bribe, but—"

"Nothing pink!" Subaru interrupted him hastily. "And no sak— *flowers*, please."

Seishiro shrugged into his coat. "How about purple baby bunnies?" he asked on his way out.

"Be careful, I might put it on the line for Yoshino-san to study."

"And? It'll be your underwear. I'll make sure to bemoan your tastes loudly when I fetch my mail."

Subaru glared at the door which had closed after Seishiro. "I'm so going to get that *Hello Kitty*-tie for him!"

"Subaru-san," his grandmother said sternly behind him. "I hope you are aware that your physical relationship with that man is completely unacceptable. You have to think of your station and your house. You have already Akiko's blood on—"

Subaru winced and very slowly turned toward her. "If you bring Akiko into this, I am going to go out of that door and I will not return," he said calmly.

She stared at him for a long moment. "I'm not bringing Akiko into this," she said cautiously. "But because you didn't send her away, she's still considered your bride and you're expected to marry."

"Marry her? She can't bear to be in the same room with me. I can't imagine—" He shook his head. "You can't expect me to live such a lie."

"You wouldn't be the first one. Your father—" she interrupted herself.

"My father...?" Subaru stared at her. "What were you going to say?"

His grandmother's face closed. "We won't be speaking of that," she declared. "And we will not mention your liaison with the Sakurazukamori again. I will inform the elders that the current situation requires you to stay with him, while stressing the importance of your part in the Dao." Her voice was cool, distanced. "There is no need to burden them with knowledge of your regrettable private choices."

Subaru shivered; his heart missed a beat, another, tried to do two at once. *...someone asked him if he needed assistance with that sweater...*

No! That wasn't him, that was— He was slipping, reacting to the marks rather than his own senses. He closed his eyes, pressed his palms together, focused on his shields. Blind and deaf for anything else, he meticulously sorted Seishiro's impulses from his own...

His breathing was ragged by the time he was done and looked up to meet his grandmother's worried eyes.

"Are you all right?" she asked, concerned. "You seemed..."

"I'll manage," he bit off against the renewed headache. He couldn't possibly take another painkiller so soon after the last one. "I'm sorry for interrupting you. My nerves are still raw; that's why I'm so sensitive at the moment." He slowly sat down in the free armchair. "Do you see now that Seishiro had good reason to ask whether or not I'm up for five hundred meters?" he laughed cynically. "In the beginning it was five meters. Five. That's less than the width of this room." He drew a deep breath. "He could have made it impossible. And he didn't. I'm not sure what scares me more — that he is so considerate about it or that I'm falling for it."

"He isn't considerate about you. He's concerned about the Dao. Don't ever forget what that man does — to countless innocents, to your sister. Don't forget the day he sprung his trap on you."

"It wasn't a trap." Subaru sighed. "It—"

"Stop protecting him. Less than twelve hours ago he held a gun to your head, intending to shoot you!"

"No, he didn't," Subaru corrected. "We're the ones who practice white onmyojutsu. We put spirit over matter, intention over reality. But that's not his way. For the Sakurazuka, intention isn't important. All that counts is reality — as brutal as it may be. You threatened him. He had to stop you. He did. As simple as that. He never intended to shoot me—"

"You can't know that criminal's mind, Subaru-san! Please be sensible. He—"

"—would have shot me if he had to," Subaru finished his sentence in icy calm. "He didn't because it wasn't necessary. Reality over intention. Matter over spirit. Their symbol isn't the pentagram just to spite us!"

"Isn't it a bit early in the day for discussing philosophy?" Seishiro said idly from the door, setting two large Isetan bags down inside. He checked their contents briefly and handed one to Subaru, not without entwining their fingers briefly. Subaru, embarrassed, found himself clinging. Seishiro frowned and studied him closely. "You slipped, didn't you?" he inquired.

"Briefly," Subaru admitted. "But I picked myself up again."

Shinkansen Osaka-Tokyo

16:26

A big afternoon sun hung low above the mountains in the west, sending its brilliant golden light almost horizontally through the Shinkansen windows. Subaru had already taken the seat at the aisle — his stomach still felt upset and a clear path to the restroom had seemed a good idea — but he hadn't escaped the light. By now, his headache had turned into needles that pierced his eyes in the rhythm of the shadows flitting over his face while the train raced over countless steel bridges towards Tokyo. He placed a hand over his eyes, blocking out the painful flicker for a moment.

"The elders will discuss the situation. I will contact you as soon as I know the particulars," his grandmother had told him before they left. "And I'll have somebody contact you from time to time to make sure you are well. Please be responsible and answer our calls this time."

"Don't have him break into my house." Seishiro's smile had held a dangerous edge. "I worked on my wards after you'd dropped in so unexpectedly."

His grandmother had ignored that. "And Subaru-san, at least stop working on his garden!"

Seishiro had burst out laughing. "That's not a *garden*. That's the green stuff growing around the house!"

Subaru wasn't sure his grandmother believed it. Her warning still rang in his ears, "Don't ever forget what that man does!" As if he could ever forget. He'd been at the house where Seishiro's mother had lived. The garden there was a place reeking of power and death; not a neglected yard with weeds and a female ginkgo covering the place with smelly fruits.

He glanced sideways at Seishiro and found him sleeping with his head leaned against the window. *He's got to be worn out*, Subaru thought with a pang of guilt. *He won't have slept with grandmother in the room, and the night before that...*

Concerned, Subaru studied Seishiro's hands, for once not cloaked in illusions. The dark-red burns surrounding the pentacle-scars weren't as bad as he'd feared and magical wounds healed without scars if scarring wasn't intended, but he couldn't deny that his clan had brought considerable pain to Seishiro as well. He didn't believe that would go without consequences for long. And yet Seishiro looked peaceful in his sleep. And young. Younger than his official thirty-five years — "April 1, 1965" was the date of birth he'd told him years ago, but Subaru was sure it was false, so he hadn't mentioned it last week — but Seishiro's true age couldn't be too different from that or the date wouldn't be believable.

Believable Lies. Unbelievable truths.

During the last four months, Subaru had learned more about the Sakurazukamori than his whole clan had during the last fourteen-hundred years, but he had learned even more about the man behind the title. Intention and reality. How was love defined in absolute terms, when intention didn't matter?

He thought about making Seishiro's sleep a little more comfortable and decided against it. Seishiro wouldn't like to be caught sleeping like this. Subaru smiled. Another two hours before the train reached Tokyo. Another two hours of obviously needed sleep; he just wondered how he could wake him up without...

Five minutes before the station, Subaru *accidentally* dropped his coat in Seishiro's lap and pretended not to notice him startling awake.

## 13 — SumeraMori 1

*Three nights ago, at the time when Tsukiyomi's face lacked his sister's bright light and the Sakura's powers ran lowest, the Tree had dug deep into its reserves. Struggling to keep its Sakurazukamori's hands from being consumed by Amaterasu's flames, it had depleted its resources more than it should have. And since then nobody had sat on the bench or taken the path running beneath its wide crown.*

*It was a cold night, though no longer dark as nights used to be a few centuries ago. Amaterasu's fast-living children had changed that. Street lamps lined the main paths of the park these days, and the museums surrounding it were bathed in light throughout the night. Once, only hanami nights were lit by paper lanterns and reverence flames, flickering between dancing, sake-seasoned snacks...*

*Snacks were rare these days, despite the lit paths and the bench Sei-chan had placed as bait between its roots. Ueno Park was a lonely place at night. Even the homeless who lived within its boundaries had long since learned not to stray too deep into its darker shadows, and the Sakura was the darkest of all. Especially when it was hungry — and tonight it was ravenous.*

*The Sakura's branches shifted in a wind that chilled not only the night of the living. Its oblivious Sakurazukamori lay curled around his opposite, basking in shared warmth while holding tightly to the one from whose marks he had suffered.*

*In their sleep they were the perfect embodiment of the taiji — the symbol at the heart of the Dao itself — and the Dao was not to be disturbed, but the Tree couldn't wait much longer. Soon, its Sakurazukamori would have to bring in prey—*

*—or serve as sustenance.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

April 8, 2000 — 02:06

It was deep in the night when Subaru woke, unsure what had ended his sleep. New moon had been three nights ago, too close for any light to seep through the blinds, and the dark red LEDs of the alarm clock on Seishiro's nightstand were the only illumination in the room. In its glow, Seishiro was a vague shadow beside him, his heart beating under Subaru's palm, comforting, tempting...

*"Your physical relationship with that man is completely unacceptable."*

Subaru sighed and rolled onto his back. A few reverence lights burned on the Yanaka cemetery beyond the wall outside; signs of filial piety, of respect to the honored deceased. Their lonely flickering cursed him, accused him of failing his clan, his ancestors.

Subaru averted his eyes, leaned his aching head against Seishiro's chest, but the darkness between their bodies held no comfort against the darkness outside.

~::~::~~

09:39

Seishiro didn't feel at his best when he woke. The birds outside the bedroom window made an obnoxious noise, considering that it was still dark—

His nose tickled and something brushed through his lashes as he blinked. He growled. His face was buried in Subaru's hair, which meant it wasn't dark, the birds were likely on time, and he was late. Great. At least the pain in his hands was gone. Disentangling himself from Subaru, he tried to avoid looking into the obscenely bright light coming from outside. Bath. Kitchen. Coffee.

A touch of a sleeping spell ensured that he'd get at least the first cup on his own. He yawned and decided not to get his morning paper today. Sleeping spells didn't work well on cats.

Half-closed drapes kept the blinding glare of the morning sun on the kitchen tiles at a bearable level. Leaning against the kitchen counter, Seishiro spooned sugar into his mug and waited for the coffee maker to finish. His temples were throbbing. Finally, he poured his coffee and had a first sip, savoring the acidic aroma of heavy East African blend, before he headed over to the table.

~::~::~~

Subaru heard Seishiro groan at a morning that had come too fast for both of them. He felt Seishiro's muscles tense against him and kept his eyes closed, waiting for Seishiro to disentangle himself and get out of bed. He easily scattered the sleeping spell that tingled against his shields afterwards. Trust was still an issue between them.

He waited until he heard the bathroom door close before he turned onto his back.

Seishiro preferred to spend the first few minutes of a day — his first coffee — on his own, without having to bother with illusions and 'being on guard'. Subaru knew that there were still things hidden from him, some on purpose, some probably just out of habit.

"He isn't considerate about you," his grandmother had warned him, but he'd known that already. Seishiro was only considerate about himself. And cautious. Very cautious. His clan had made him that way.

Subaru sighed. He had yet to find out where he himself fit into that jumble. And into that of his own house. The reverence lights outside weren't visible in the bright light of day, but their accusation remained. His clan wouldn't postpone a solution indefinitely—

Something shattered in the kitchen. A chair screeched on the tiles. Subaru threw up his shields when the scars on his hands flared and a wave of power gushed through the house.

°°°Om. Amirita. Teizei. Kara. Un.°°°

°°°Om. Amirita. Teizei. Kara. Un.°°°

He reinforced his shields by repeating the mantra to Amida Buddha; most powers working within Seishiro's wards wouldn't be able to influence the *Deathless One*.

°°°Om. Amirita. Teizei. Kara. Un.°°°

The harmonies of the singing dead still fluctuated with the ebbing power of the wave when he cautiously left the bed, focusing on his fingertips.

°°°Om. Amirita. Teizei. Kara. Un.°°°

Where was...?

"Seishiro?"

He went out into the hallway. Banning and repellant fields flared brightly above the stairs down to the basement. The door keeping his ancestor's malevolent spirit imprisoned seemed to be made of fire with runes of ice embedded in it. Subaru gave the stairs a wide berth; the repellant Seishiro had put on the steps after he moved in was strong enough to make him violently sick if he came too close to it. He knew for sure. Seishiro had made him test it; an experience he didn't want to repeat.

The kitchen door was open as usual, but the room beyond was empty. One of the chairs was toppled; and a black-and-white coffee mug lay shattered in the middle of the floor, its content spilled all over the tiles. Subaru studied the mess carefully. Coffee drops stuck to the front of the kitchen counter. Shards had skittered under the table and against the floor panel.

Careful because of his bare feet, he crouched down and fished one of the shards from the puddle. It resembled a penguin's webbed foot — Seishiro's favorite mug. He cautiously tasted the coffee. Sugared; Seishiro's coffee.

A squall of sakura petals spilled Seishiro back into the room. Stumbling, his sleeves soaked crimson, he slammed into the kitchen table. Subaru steadied him, winced as small shards cut into his soles. "Are you—?"

Seishiro freed himself with an angry twist of his shoulders. He looked... disheveled. Mussed. But there was no blood on him.

"What happened to you?"

If Seishiro heard him, he didn't show it. Sakura petals stuck in his hair, swirling to the ground as he pushed himself away from the table. He took a long step across the coffee puddle now littered with sakura and stalked out the door, already unbuttoning his shirt with sharp, angry movements. Subaru winced and carefully pried the ceramic splinters out of his skin, angling for a paper-towel to dab off the blood and the few crunched, strangely white sakura petals sticking to it. Those on the floor were edged bright red. Had Seishiro been working already? Had that been the force he'd felt earlier?

He dabbed at the cuts again then fetched himself Seishiro's worn pair of household slippers from under the sink.

Seishiro reappeared five minutes later with a tight roll of clothes under his arm, still closing his cufflinks. Frowning at the mess of shards and splattered coffee, he disappeared in the small room holding washing machine, laundry dryer and ironing board. A moment later the lid of the washing machine was slammed shut. Subaru was just making his tea when he returned, crossing the kitchen with a terse, "I've got appointments. Mostly downtown."

Subaru set down his cup and followed him into the hallway. "When will you be back?"

"Several hours." Seishiro was already shrugging into his jacket. "I may be late for dinner." He took his keys from the table, slipped them into his pocket and headed down the stairs to grab his coat and step into his shoes. "I expect you to be fine—" He arched a suggestive brow at Subaru. "—after last night."

"Are you referring to the fact that we were both dead to the world or that we overslept for two hours?" Subaru returned, unperturbed. "How can I reach you?"

"Not at all." Seishiro mockingly raised his hand, showing him the pentacle scar on its back as he headed out the door. "Don't worry. I'll notice *if* you slip up."

"Don't think I'll clean up the mess your tree made out of the kitchen!"

"Then don't slip on the coffee."

Subaru stared after him until the garden gate fell into its lock. Something wasn't right. Something was absolutely not right. Seishiro didn't even avoid Yoshi weaving around his legs in front of the gate.

Subaru left the door open for the cat and turned on his heel; the washing machine hadn't run long. And to maintain an illusion, Seishiro had to be around.

He paused its program and ignored the warning about opening the barrel while a program was keyed in to pull out the shirt Seishiro had worn this morning. He'd been right; the cuffs *were* stained with blood. So Seishiro had been working and— Subaru was about to put the shirt back into the machine when he noticed something else, something that made his grip on the wet cloth tighten: the inner lining of Seishiro's collar was soaked with blood, too.

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
09:56

Lady Sumeragi drew a deep breath and hid her hands in her kimono sleeves. In a few minutes the elders would meet in the great hall; the whole house was already buzzing with rumors about the reason for this unexpected council meeting, about Subaru-san's sudden departure, about the number of guards and servants that had been put to sleep in the middle of the day...

It had taken her hours to break the spell on Hamamatsu and Shigeru-kun. Not to speak of the others! There were too many gifted onmyoji among their clan to hide the identity of the intruder, giving rise to the wildest speculations about why the wards weren't damaged and nobody was killed. The Sakurazukamori...

*"If I were to start that war among our clans in your house, did you really think I'd waste my time with the peasants?"*

She didn't know what to make of him. She'd expected their adversary to be smart, a shrewd operator who knew how to get what he wanted; she hadn't expected a highly intelligent man who was actually pleasant in conversation, even charming, though with an edge of darkness he didn't bother to conceal.

Watching him touch her grandson, hold him, all the while knowing that he'd done so much more...

Her nails dug into her skin. She had doubted Subaru-san's claim of consent, spoken in anger and — as she knew now — pain, but...

"...purple baby bunnies?"

"Be careful, I might put it on the line for Yoshino-san to study."

Her hands clawed around her wrists that weren't as fragile as they had been a few years ago, the result of the constant exercise of moving the wheelchair. The boy had once sworn to kill him and had begged forgiveness for that sin. She wasn't blind. She knew he was falling, open-eyed, into the Sakurazukamori's trap again and there was nothing she could do about it. It was too easy to forget who that man was.

"Be careful," she whispered as she gave the wheels of her chair a first, determined push to carry her out the room. Ameru was waiting for her outside. He would accompany her to the meeting that concerned his future almost as much as Subaru's. The voices of the assembled elders wafted out into the corridor. She nodded quietly at him, for just this instance acknowledging who he was...

...no, who he had been.

"Be careful," he said quietly, echoing her without knowing it.

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
10:25

The bright green shield bug crawled slowly up the window frame. Filigree feelers palpated the surface ahead, gliding over glass and white lacquered wood alike. Both materials were too sleek, but the groove between the pane and the frame was just rough enough. At the end of the groove there would be only lacquer too smooth to crawl on...

...but the shield bug didn't know that. Subaru, breathing in the scent of his cooling coffee, watched the insect stubbornly advancing, oblivious to the obstacle ahead. The coffee was slightly bitter; it had been on the warming plate for too long while he'd swept up the shards and got rid of the puddle. He hadn't wanted Yoshi to cut himself on the shards, or leave coffee paw prints all over the house.

Two legs of the shield bug slid off the smooth surface and the insect shifted its weight. Yoshi sat beneath it on the window sill. His whiskers stood on end; the twitching tip of his tail threatened to topple Subaru's mug. Rescuing his coffee, Subaru put a hand on the cat's back to keep it from going after the bug. Yoshi arched into his touch. Soft, silky fur vibrated against his palm with the cat's purr. Subaru briefly closed his eyes at the sensation, before taking a sip of coffee. He was crawling up a groove of his own. The heart-shaped insect in front of him would survive a fall, but would he? What would happen if he reached the end of his groove? Hadn't he reached it already?

He emptied the coffee in one large gulp and stood. Carefully, he picked the bug off the window frame and the distraught insect sprayed its secretion onto his fingers, tiny yellow legs flailing under its big green body. Yoshi flattened his ears at the stench of rotten eggs and disappeared under the table; Subaru merely wrinkled his nose as he took the bug outside.

The air was warm and smelled of Spring, of Summer to come to Death's garden.

He sat the bug on the rough bark of the ginkgo. His ferns were rising tall and green in the ancient tree's shadow. Two days ago, his grandmother had rolled across the grass, tearing up its blades to form knives for attacking Seishiro. On his behalf.

Today no traces of that were left. Grass had grown — changed — to heal the damage done to the garden and ensure continuity: continuity and change, irrevocably entwined.

Subaru laid a hand onto the rough bark beside him and sat down. The humidity of the earth soaked into his pants; the bark was rough against the back of his head, but somehow it felt comforting. Had his grandmother really missed the irony in using grass blades to protect him against Seishiro?

Subaru sighed and studied the scab in his palm where one of her grass knives had cut him. The healing wound itched. Wind rustled in the wide crown above his head and a ginkgo leaf fell into his lap. Then the ancient tree remained still.

~::~::~~

Kasumigaseki-cho, Tokyo,  
12:38

It was past midday when Sakurazuka Romiro, chief operations officer of the Tokyo Office of Sakura Enterprises, stepped out of the lift. He pushed through the wide glass door engraved with a stylized sakura blossom overlaid with five swords; their *company's* logo. He snorted, disgusted. Listing the honored Mori as a mere company — a *composting company* no less! — was probably Seishiro's biggest offense. Though for Romiro the sudden cancellation of Thursday's meeting to assess the newer cases was a close second. It had forced him to do a lot of the footwork normally left to less gifted personnel, which was the reason that he was working on a Saturday. It was afternoon and this was the first time since 4 a.m. that he would get to sit down for a while. He was a section leader! It was the Sakurazukamori who was supposed to tire himself out. Not that Seishiro cared anything about the duties involved in the position he'd stolen.

Romiro shrugged out of his coat, noting with some satisfaction that Namane-san, the office lady on duty, hurried to catch it. "My usual coffee, please." He gave her the briefest nod of acknowledge. "I'm in the main off—" He frowned, when she suddenly stood firmly rooted in his way.

"I'm sorry, Sakurazuka-san, but Sakurazuka-sama's—"

"He's here!?" Romiro stopped in his tracks. "Don't tell me he's working!"

"As you wish, sir. But he is in his office with all the files of the open cases, and requested not to be disturbed, so if you were to be so kind as to use your own office today..." She indicated the door on the side. "I'll bring your coffee right away."

Romiro tossed his briefcase on his chair and glared at the narrow, nondescript window behind his desk. It overlooked the backyard of the Ministry of Justice: lots of bricks and a few withering potted plants. The main office was a corner room; its panoramic windows looked out across the crossing of Sakurada- and Uchibori-dori, giving a free view of the Kokyo behind its moats. Romiro ground his teeth and closed his door. The view towards the Emperor, the *judgment of power* it symbolized, should have been his and not Seishiro's, who didn't appreciate its worth and neglected his duties.

Canceling a case assessment meeting at fifteen minutes' notice...

Romiro sat down and rested his elbows on the black leather of his writing pad. Usually, Seishiro was more cautious than that. More cautious and—

He frowned. "Why did you cancel that meeting, Sei-kun?" Romiro asked nobody in specific. "Why indeed? What happened that you were in such a hurry?" He tapped onto the lid of his laptop before he opened it and powered it up. If Seishiro had been as short of time as it seemed, then he'd been forced to compromise security for speed. He entered his password and waited for the interface to load.

~::~::~~

14:28

*Sasaki, plain-clothes detective...* Seishiro flipped through the file, stopping at the obligatory photograph. He remembered the man: quick-witted, sharp-eyed, focused, determined. He might have a whiff of talent in him, but nothing remotely strong enough to endanger the state.

*Partners: Imonoyama Tsuzuku [private living arrangement], Hashiba Shigemitsu [work, (private?)].*

*Hashiba...* Seishiro frowned. There was a connection with the Sawada case and Tsuzuku...

He shook his head and tossed the file on to the 'discarded' stack. Sasaki's death would cause a lot more trouble than it could possibly prevent, both for the state and himself.

He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He felt sleepy and light-headed. The Tree had taken more blood than he'd realized at first; a disconcerting thought. It was the first time since he had Subaru's marks on his hands that the Tree had drawn blood at all and it hadn't healed the abrasions afterwards. Either the Tree's situation had been a lot more desperate than he'd realized, or—

He straightened, put his glasses back on, and opened the next file. He couldn't afford the 'or'.

15:06

The small transparent plastic bag was carefully sealed, with a red label taped to its right upper corner: "7635 - Ochizawa Haruhi, physical evidence #1: hair cuttings, obtained: April 4, 2000 at Be Beautiful Salon, 6-9-6 Ginza, Tokyo". The following page contained the same information, as well as a photograph of the bag at the top of a sign-out sheet. Seishiro noted, satisfied, that the list was still empty. He put his signature and the current date in the first row, took the evidence bag and headed out for the lab.

As expected, Namane Ayako was still holding the front desk. He nodded at her, indicating the evidence bag. "Please assist me in the lab for a moment."

The "lab" was a heavily shielded — and strongly warded — room in the center of the building, away from important structures or outer walls. When Seishiro had begun his work it had been a library of sorts, keeping old texts and magical items. He'd had the books scanned and made accessible via a database and the magical items and oddities examined and put into safe storage. The room had been reinforced and refurbished. In times of AIDS and MRSA, there was some risk in using wood-carved symbols soaked in blood. As far as Seishiro was aware, nobody had ever examined what effect spells and potions had on multiplying, *mutating* bacterial strains — and he certainly didn't want to be the one to conduct the experiment. No scientific magazine would accept that kind of paper anyway.

Seishiro waited until Namane had closed the door before he switched off the UV lamp above the stainless steel working table and put down the evidence bag. "Prepare a large vacutainer," he told her. "I need 50 ml venous blood from your left arm."

Given the framework of the case, he had a pretty clear idea for what to search. Ochizawa Haruhi, born near Adachigahara and married to a business man well above her station, apparently defined her social value entirely through her daughter. A common story within Tokyo, were there not the nursery doctor, who — like one of Ai's kindergarten prep-school teachers last month — had committed suicide, leaving a letter apologizing for lusting after an innocent infant. And though the original ogress after which Adachigahara had been named was long gone, the area was still known for a certain kind of spiritual interaction with the living. Tests for succu-doku<sup>34</sup> were more reliable if done with blood from a source the succubus wouldn't find desirable.

He put on a pair of disposable nitrile gloves and wiped down bag and gloves with Sterillium before taking a wax liner to draw a pentagram on the polished steel surface of the table. After shaking a strand of hair from the bag into the pentagram, he added five protective characters at the tips and resealed the bag.

Namane had already rolled up her sleeve and applied the tourniquet. He nodded approvingly, connected a one-way needle to the vacutainer tube and wiped down the skin above the vein with an ethanol pad. "Make a fist, please." The needle slipped smoothly into her arm and dark-red blood filled the vial. He released the tourniquet, removed the needle and pressed a gauze pad against the wound, closing her hand over it. "Hold it."

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34 Japanese poison, venom: doku — succubus venom: succu-doku... heh, sudoku. ;)



He returned to the examination table and used her blood to write the querying symbols into the inner edges of the pentagram. The expected greenish glow above the hair appeared before he even finished the third symbol. At the fourth, the whole strand burst into flame. "Positive. When you're done, find me the list of institutions attended by Ochizawa Haruhi's daughter Ai, age 3. The case number is 7635." He threw a swift glance at the wall clock above the door. "And add the closing times of her courses today, if there are any." He tossed the used gloves into the dust bin, while his assistant used a small fire extinguisher on the table. "I'll be in my office."

~::~::~~

18:47

Romiro leaned against the black, air-cushioned leather back of his chair and mentally went over his results again.

On April 6, somebody traveling with a NPSC ID had taken JAL175 at 8:55 from Tokyo Haneda to Osaka Kansai International. Seishiro had canceled the meeting about the new cases at 07:46 that day. NPSC IDs didn't have names attached to them and their numbers weren't searchable, but there weren't that many of them: overall estimates were well below a hundred. And he knew for a fact that Sakurazuka Seishiro carried one.

The flight had landed punctually at ten past ten at Kansai International. His check of the phone connections of Sakura Enterprises' Osaka Office revealed a two-minute call to the COO extension from a public phone on the KIX railway platform at 10:16. The Haruka express trains departed at 10:18. Haruka Express trains went from KIX via Tennoji and Shin-Osaka to Kyoto...

Romiro tapped his index fingers together. The Sumeragi were in Kyoto...

Seishiro had to know that a flight on the NPSC ID could — in contrast to a Shinkansen ticket paid in cash — be traced back to him. If his destination had indeed been Kyoto, then what had been so urgent that the ten-minute difference in traveling time out-weighed the risk?

~::~::~~

Musashino-shi, Tokyo

18:56

Evening traffic rushed in a blur of red and white lights past the black skeletons of street trees. Musashino-shi wasn't downtown Tokyo, but it did its best to mimic it, Seishiro thought dryly. He had failed to escape the beginning of the rush hour on his way here.

The building ahead of him was brightly lit; a tall neon sign announced it as 'Sapiru Private School'. The space on the sidewalk in front of it was filled with chatting women, waiting for the childrens' prep school to end. The coats in their hands were small; it was a prep school for kindergarten.

As he sauntered past the groups of waiting mothers, he spotted his target easily enough among them. Prim hair, mint coat, Gucci purse — after all, this prep school fed into a kindergarten associated with Seikei university, one of Tokyo's finest. The color of the small goose-down parka in Ochizawa Haruhi's hands matched that of her coat.

A few heads turned, eyes following him. Hands in his suit pockets, he gave them a smile that provoked a few embarrassed blushes, while testing his target's aura. Dark. Twisted. She'd tapped deeply into the forbidden arts to become what she was: a woman using a succubus to help her toddler along in an increasingly ruthless market. But she'd been too greedy, disturbing causality too much for it to be ignored. It made her a target, would make her daughter a threat to society if she wasn't stopped now. Target. Valid.

Turning the corner of the next building, he continued into the deeper shadows off the main street. Telephone and power cables criss-crossed overhead. The front of a closed warehouse took up the right side; a plain wall plastered with advertisements was on the left. He concentrated. The illusion would be only a whisper against her neck. He wanted *her* to come to him, not the whole group of waiting mothers.

...I know what you've done...

He made it titillating against her nape, something close to a touch. Close.

...I know what you've done for Ai to succeed. Do you know what your husband, your rival mothers will think?... Ai was three years old. He'd put good money on her mother being a fully fledged 'education mama' already. ...I know what you've done...

She came around the corner, stalked towards him. Fast. Angry. Sure of herself. "You—"

Her eyes bulged as his spell closed her windpipe. She grabbed her throat, staggered towards him, past him. He had the sakanagi strike her as she fell.

Clean and fast. No measurable evidence. He concentrated to call in the Tree—

"Okaa-san?"

Seishiro turned at the tiny voice behind him.

"Ok—" Large eyes in a round face under feathery hair made into pigtails widened when they spotted the corpse, then returned to him, becoming larger, rounder; full red lips trembled, sending a sensual thrill down his spine, and he knew he had miscalculated.

Ochizawa Ai wasn't going to *be made* a threat!

He fell to a knee. The strike was pure reflex, outstretched hand hitting beneath the tiny sternum, magically sharpened nails cutting through muscles and intestines. Her body was too small for a clean kill. A twist of his wrist tossed her against the brick wall as he pushed himself up. Intestines trailed from her ripped belly. Still she moved, raised a chubby hand towards him. Crushing her skull with his heel, he finally called the Tree.

The force of its arrival nearly threw him off his feet. The Sakura was desperate to feed and careless in its greed. He struggled to direct a fraction of its power to clean blood and brains from his clothes. His head throbbed. He felt cold. There was no chance that he'd manage to relocate the bodies in this condition. Musashino was far enough from Tokyo downtown not to have surveillance cameras in its back streets...

For a brief moment, he just leaned with his shoulder against the street lamp, trying to catch his breath. The Tree's pleasure washed over him, hot, contented now. A blossom-cushioned twig whispered over his cheek, tickled behind his ear, but he had no energy to call it to order at the moment. The street light above him flickered to life. He looked down the street, his eyes following the line of lamps lighting up in the distance.

He sighed. Burying his hands deep into his suit pockets, he pushed himself off the lamp post and headed slowly down the narrow street towards the blinking tumult of the broad avenue at its end. At least the streets leading downtown would be a little emptier now.

~::~::~~

Kasumigaseki-cho, Tokyo

22:47

The laptop was the only real light source left in the room. A few offices in the Ministry of Justice were still lit, too, but their light didn't reach across the stone yard. It had become late while Romiro was poring over video footage from Kyoto Station.

The Haruka Express, departing from Kansai International at 10:18 on April 6 had reached it at 11:31 as scheduled, but Seishiro hadn't left it.

Frustrated, Romiro glared at the screen. A dozen windows showed various camera angles covering the crucial parts of Kyoto Station at different times. It had taken all Romiro's clout — and some barely concealed threats — to get access to the video recordings; he'd search them thoroughly, but it looked as if Seishiro had slipped his net once again. Grinding his teeth, he reached over to cut the connection. And froze, hastily hit replay and watched the full sequence again. And again. Then he stopped the playback and leaned back in his suddenly very comfortable chair as he looked at a still frame.

JR-KS-X99-20000406-1316 showed Sakurazuka Seishiro...

...and a clearly intoxicated Sumeragi Subaru, heading up the stairs to the Granvia hotel.

~::~::~~

Ueno-cho, Tokyo

22:58

It was almost eleven by the time Seishiro stopped the Aristo in his parking lot at Ueno Station. Suppressing a yawn, he got out of the car and activated the central locking system, before renewing the protective spells. If the Mori were tracking his car, they were in for some nasty surprises. He pocketed his keys and headed down to street level. Even Ueno's notorious evening traffic was thinning by now. Turning up his collar against the night chill, he crossed the wide street into the park.

Thirty-five minutes to his home and his bed — if he kept his pace and the Tree didn't delay him. Thirty-five minutes. He felt the blood-loss acutely now. Going near the Tree in this condition wasn't a good idea. The Sakura couldn't be trusted; but he'd been to the office today and he hadn't been at his best. If they traced him...

Parking in Ueno was not suspicious — if he saw to the Tree — and the Tree's maboroshi would cut any tracers that might have slipped his attention. He yawned and wished he could have taken the Yamanote to Uguisudani and been home in less than half the time. He wished—

He left the brightly lit main path for the deeper shadows under the trees. Something moved in the dark. He tensed, hand closed around a fuda, searching the dark for an assailant. The old homeless woman stared

at him out of wide, frightened eyes and scuttled away into the dark. He slowly released the fuda. Ahead of him the Tree was still glowing in gluttonous joy on the spiritual plane. A twig reached for him, tried to entice, to entwine him. He brushed it aside, more weary than angry. A second twig came out of the dark, raised his chin—

...*Go home...* The Tree's blossoms whispered with a warm flutter of petals over his cheek. ...*Rest...*

He yawned. The streetlights ahead seemed haloed as if there were fog, but the night was clear. He blinked angrily. Cutting corners by crossing through the yard of the International Library for Children's Literature, he headed out of the park. A whiff of sakura kept him from walking in front of a bus on the Kototodori. What was—

The small streets beyond were empty and silent.

He yawned again, fumbled in his pocket for his keys.

The gate closed behind him. The house door...

He kicked his shoes off his feet. The coat fell onto the stairs. His keys jingled on the hallway table. He fumbled with his jacket buttons—

"Let me help."

Slender hands reached for his throat. He batted them aside, dropped into bed...

Sleep.

~::~::~~

Ukyo-ku, Kyoto

23:38

The room was old, its wooden beams and paper walls darkened by time. The screened electric lamp on the wall provided a honey-colored light that failed to hide the overall chill of the small guestroom. The futon had already been laid out and it had been too late to ask for a meal.

Ameru folded his dark brown cloak neatly and hung it over the back of the single woven chair occupying one corner of the room before he sat down on the futon, crossing his legs.

It had hurt to see her again after all these years. It had hurt to see her like this. Old. Frail. *Worried*. He slowly formed his right hand into a fist. Nobody had told him that she'd been injured, that she'd retained disabilities from a battle he hadn't known she fought.

Slowly, he released the tension until his palm lay flat on his knee again. The woman he'd met today no longer fit the picture he'd carried in his heart all these years, but she still wielded the power that had formed his life. And Subaru's.

Involuntarily, his fingernails dug into the skin around his kneecap. The boy was foolish to disobey her like this, but then, he was foolish, too, wasn't he? He would visit his daughter's grave before returning to Naha. And Sachiko's. With a deep sigh he lay down and pulled the cover up to his ears.

Kyoto was a cold place. Always had been.

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

23:41

Subaru studied Seishiro sprawling on the bed and contemplated revenge for the countless "Eat before you sleep!" admonitions he'd received over time. But Seishiro seemed dead to the world, and so Subaru cautiously eased the dark glasses off his nose and put them on the nightstand, then undid the last button of his jacket and removed his belt.

His hands faltered briefly when he reached for the collar pin: almost hidden by the tie was a gash in the upper front of the shirt, surrounded by dark stains, as if something with oozing claws had slashed for Seishiro's throat and barely missed. Bandages underneath the shirt had prevented the slash from cutting the skin; more bandages were visible under the cuffs, matching the blood stains on Seishiro's shirt this morning — this time Seishiro's injuries hadn't been healed magically. Subaru shook his head and opened the collar pin to remove the tie and unbutton collar and cuffs on the shirt. Seishiro was now about as comfortable as he could make him without waking him up. He was sleeping on his comforter, so Subaru threw his own over him. The blanket they'd given Kamui when he'd spent the night was still in the laundry. Subaru stripped down to his underwear and, with a resigned shrug, crawled under the cover beside Seishiro, snuggling close.

For warmth.

When the phone rang it seemed only five minutes had passed. Subaru snatched the handset off the nightstand at the second ring, pressing the answering button right away and hoping it hadn't woken Seishiro. "Yes?"

=Good evening. My name's Omi. May I speak with Sumeragi Subaru, please?=-

"I'm on the phone, Omi-san," Subaru answered quietly to avoid disturbing Seishiro beside him. He glanced at the bedside clock. It was close to midnight. "What happened?"

=Please excuse the late call. I only returned home myself to find a missive from your grandmother. She insisted that I call upon you today no matter what.=

Subaru sighed. Seishiro beside him murmured in his sleep and snuggled against him. "I hope you don't intend to come over right now."

=I was hoping for an appointment on Sunday.= Omi gave an uneasy laugh. =I'm sorry to disturb you like this, but I would not risk going against your grandmother's explicit wishes. I'm already straining them by merely using the phone.=

Subaru went mentally over his plans for tomorrow. "There's a small cafe near the north-west exit of Ueno Park, across the Kototoi-dori. I'll be there at three o'clock." He threw a brief glance at Seishiro beside him. "Alone. I assume that meets one of her conditions."

=Again, I'm sorry,= Omi said, clearly embarrassed. =Please have a good night.=

"You, too." Subaru hung up. Seishiro threw an arm around his waist, holding on to him tightly. He felt too warm to the touch...

*The Tree found its Sakurazukamori in bed, sound asleep, hugging his cumbersome pet. There was no illusion left on him, not even to hide the healing burns on his hands or the bandages around his wrists and throat.*

*The Sakura touched invisible blossoms to them, examining the wounds underneath. Its twigs had cut deeper than it planned, had taken more than it should have. The wounds were too old now to be healed spiritually and the applied dressings and antiseptics made that impossible anyway. It trailed a small sprig thickly wrapped in blossoms up Sei-chan's arm and over his cheek, finding him slightly feverish.*

*Moss-colored eyes opened and squinted warily in the dark. The Tree retracted its twig just in time when Subaru put a protective arm around its Sakurazukamori.*

*It ran another sprig over Sei-chan's cheek, which had him moan and turn unconsciously into its touch. Countless blossoms rained onto the blood-drenched ground of the spirit world as the Sakura quivered in satisfaction.*

...Still mine...

## 14 — Under the weather

*The breeze in the eternal night of the Spirit world increased, ruffling first petals, then whole tufts of flowers, and finally shaking twigs, even branches. By then, whole blossoms were torn off their stalks to disappear in the infinite darkness.*

*In this unruly night the Sakura kept a tight watch over its guardian. Yue's manifestation, in the main fork of its physical crown, sharpened the spirit blade while staring out into the quiet night of the living and listening to the whispers of the Lady Ginkgo. The spirit wind announced change and Sei-chan's fever had yet to fall. Sei-chan wasn't replaceable yet; his eldest was only fifteen and the Tree wanted succession as it was meant to be, not as it had been enforced these last hundred and thirty years.*

*Years in which it had seen Tokyo engulfed in flames twice.*

*The first time had been an earthquake, striking at midday at the end of summer — and if the Sakura hadn't used Yue's skills to throw up protection from the sakura trees of the park to the ginkgoes in Yanaka, its foothold in the world of the living would have ceased to exist.*

*The second time, fire had rained from the sky. Its Sakurazukamori had been lost in the flames, but the spiritual protections built twenty years earlier had held. Afterwards, there had been two shocks in the distance, of ancient kekkai crumbling forever and scattering in a wind that still felt poisonous when it flowed through its physical branches days later.*

*It had taken Sei-chan's terse descriptions forty years later for the Tree to understand what had happened, and his acidic comments for it to see what had gone wrong after the Battle of Ueno had left it blind to changes in the world of Amaterasu's children.*

*The sword in the shadows was meant to keep the emperor merciful. Under the Mori it had done the opposite.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
April 9, 2000

Light was seeping in thin stripes through almost closed Venetian blinds, hinting at late morning, when Subaru finally opened his eyes. He hadn't slept much after he felt Seishiro, feverish, reacting to a touch that wasn't his. Seishiro, who was still curled around him now, still sound asleep. Subaru felt slow, even breaths touching the side of his throat. The wool of Seishiro's slacks lay rough against the bare skin of his legs. The scent of sakura stuck heavily to their sheets; underneath he smelled sweat. And blood.

Seishiro's own blood, or—?

Subaru nudged him, but didn't get as much as a groan in reply. Seishiro was still too warm to the touch. The bandage around his right wrist had come loose. The skin underneath was reddened. Two deep scratches across the pulse were scabbed over, the rest were superficial abrasions. It wasn't a dangerous injury, but it looked painful. Given the fever, Seishiro was probably better off sleeping, but Subaru himself didn't want to spend all day in bed.

Escaping it — or more precisely, Seishiro's stubborn hold — turned out to be a time-consuming task, which he finally solved by gradually replacing himself with his pillow. He winced when putting his bare feet to the floor; the scab on his sole had hardened overnight. He tucked the comforter around Seishiro, who buried his face with a contended murmur in the pillow, hugging it even tighter as he slept on while Subaru limped to the bathroom for some soft gauze pads.

The kitchen was chilly, almost cold and Subaru hurried to turn on the radiator before searching for his tea set. He found it in the dish washer, still dirty; the machine hadn't been set to run yesterday. The water was also cold and the odor coming from the garbage pail under the sink didn't bode well, either.

Normally, when he got up the kitchen was already comfortably warm and often miso soup simmered on the stove. The pail would be empty and outside; the coffee machine bubbling and the water for his tea hot. By the time Seishiro sat down with the morning paper or a paperback novel and his coffee, he'd have done all that — and probably more. Subaru had never seen the room in a condition like this, with haphazardly swept tiles and coffee-speckled cabinets.

There was no time to clean just now, but the least he could do was make breakfast. A swift check of the fridge returned a whole cucumber, three tomatoes and a small lime. He placed everything on a chopping board and searched for a knife.

Peeling the cucumber and slicing it thinly without cutting himself proved less difficult than he'd expected. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that this time he didn't wear slippery gloves and there weren't two people swarming around him, chatting, laughing, teasing, *distracting* him from the task. Or maybe it was just that it was quiet and nobody watched the first clumsy cuts until he got a feeling for the procedure.

The glass bowl was half filled with cucumber slices when he finished. Cutting the tomatoes in eighths, adding them to the slices and squeezing lime juice over everything before mixing it all was a matter of minutes. Tasting the salad, he decided against additional spices and just threw a wet kitchen towel over the bowl to keep it fresh for a while. It also wouldn't hurt to make coffee for Seishiro together with his tea water...

Five minutes later, he switched on the rice cooker and went to get the newspaper from the gate. Yoshi sat on the other side, looking expectantly at him through the bars. "You're spending more time with us than with your mistress," Subaru told him while unlocking the gate. "Don't you think she feels lonely?" The cat pointedly ignored the lecture and added a seam of hair to his pants before vanishing, tail high above its back, into the house. Subaru pulled the morning paper out of the bars of the gate and followed the cat slowly.

~::~::~~

Hair brushed over Seishiro's cheek, tickling his nose. He sneezed and blinked sleepily. *...Subaru should have gotten a haircut instead of a dye-job. Red-blond isn't his color—*

A purr had him jerk away.

Rolling, frustrated, onto his back, Seishiro seriously wondered if the additional layer of tracer protection for his daily mail was worth putting up with...

*...that!*

He glared at the happily purring cat and his head made a serious attempt to kill him. Groaning, he laid an arm across his eyes to shield himself from the light. His open cuff flapped against his cheek. He froze.

Open. Cuff.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position. He remembered kicking off his shoes, but the rest... His jacket was unbuttoned; collar and cuffs of the shirt opened. He spotted his glasses — neatly folded — on the nightstand. And he was pretty sure he hadn't done that himself. His collar pin and the cufflinks lay next to them. And he was absolutely sure, he hadn't done that! Which left Subaru. Also for tie and belt being hung over the back of the desk chair. But... why?

His head wouldn't stop throbbing, and it had taken strength to sit up. Not good. His pulse was too fast and too weak; his skin was clammy, yet he felt uncomfortably warm, indicating at least a light fever. Given the unpleasant condition of his clothes, it had been higher overnight — which also explained his thirst and the effort each movement took right now.

It didn't explain the cat.

He gave Yoshi another annoyed glare and forced himself to get up, putting a hand against the wall until he felt steady. Fresh clothes were a must. A drink and an extended shower were also required. He sniffed. Very extended.

*Bath. Water. Shower.* Running his free hand over his cheek, he completed his list: *Shave.*

And then he'd probably be awake enough to face whatever Subaru had done to his kitchen.

~::~::~~

Seishiro arrived at breakfast about twenty minutes after Subaru had heard him showering. "I'm sorry. I seem to have overslept. I'll tackle the dirt later." In his black slacks and partially buttoned shirt he appeared relaxed, even at ease, as he went to pour himself a coffee. "We'll have to content ourselves with toast."

"I've made a salad." Subaru indicated the still covered bowl, earning himself a sharp, instantly wary look. "And there's hot rice." He decided to overlook the cautious scanning of the room while Seishiro put his coffee down on the table and took a seat opposite him. He also ignored the brief query for spells that tingled in his marks when Seishiro uncovered the salad to serve himself, but when he reached over for the rice bowl and the sleeve riding up his arm revealed nothing of the injuries underneath, Subaru had enough. He banged his cup onto its saucer. "You don't need your illusions." Seishiro froze for the briefest of instants, then continued heaping rice into his dish. "I know your wrists and throat are slashed and you're running a temperature — or at least you did last night — so please stop wasting your strength. You're hiding nothing I haven't seen already."

"Are you sure about that?" Seishiro returned, picking up his chopsticks and choosing an eighth of a tomato to eat. "This is delicious."

"Are you afraid I'll spot your grey hairs?" Subaru challenged, ignoring the compliment.

"Are you so eager to see me injured?"

"No, but I'd like to see you and not an illusion of you."

"Me?" Seishiro arched a brow. His eyes looked grey behind the cognac-colored glasses he wore indoors, but the slightly feverish gleam in them was still unmistakable. "Maybe I'm just another illusion and there's no one at all." But he appeared paler now; and Subaru could see that he had rebandaged his wrists, though not his throat. The skin there looked raw, reddened, and sore. A few small cuts, covered in scab, criss-crossed near the pulse beneath his jaw, but Subaru knew better than to ask about them. He watched Seishiro slowly, methodically emptying his dish. Seishiro wasn't going to "tackle the dirt" today, Subaru decided silently for himself. No way.

Two hours later, Subaru dunked a cloth into the bright red plastic bowl he'd filled with warm water and detergent. The dried coffee stains came off easily enough, but the smears they left were still all too visible on the cabinets. The room was filled with lemon scent oddly matching the color of the furniture. Who would have thought of the Sakurazukamori having a lime green kitchen?

Subaru stubbornly rubbed away at a particularly thick smudge. Seishiro had left the cleaning to him without much resistance, which said all Subaru needed to know about his real condition. He sighed, running the cloth a final time over the surface before he got off his knees. The floor needed a wipe, too. There were prominent paw prints across the tiles, the reason why he'd returned a reluctant Yoshi to his real owner earlier, despite the fifteen minutes small talk about kittens being in love with their vets which were usually involved.

He glanced at the clock. The floor would have to wait, or he'd be late for his appointment with Omi. Wiping his hands with the dishtowel, he went in search of Seishiro, and found him in the living room. "I'm meeting a relative at Inamura's. I won't be—"

Seishiro had dozed off with his feet stuck under the kotatsu and an open book in his lap. With the blinds closed against the early afternoon light, only thinnest strips of sunlight reached the black carpet. The comfortable dimness gave the room a dreamy, almost surreal quality. The diffuse lighting drew attention to the acrylic painting of the Sakura above the couch, erasing the red of the blood and accentuating the blues and the white of the moonlight...

*"Maybe I'm just another illusion."*

Subaru studied him thoughtfully. Seishiro had stuffed two of the blood-red silk cushions against the couch in his back. He seemed to be comfortable enough as he was. His chin rested on his chest; his left hand lay relaxed on the carpet. The white bandage around his wrist almost gleamed where the sunlight touched it.

Subaru made sure that the kotatsu was warm, before he closed the living room door silently behind him. He'd leave a note for Seishiro on the kitchen table.

Ueno-cho, Tokyo  
14:57

It was a warm day for the 9th of April, feeling more like early summer than mid-spring. Subaru rounded the last corner towards the cafe. The afternoon sun was shining brightly, hot on his shoulders; he had forgone his coat.

A few tables stood outside, shielded from the sun by the cafe's awning and from the passers-by by a row of potted palms. A group of middle-school girls in their white-and-blue uniforms occupied the largest of them, chattering, laughing, flashing cell phones. A couple of overweight tourists in screaming shirts had pushed their table out into the sun. Omi was nowhere to be seen.

The door jingled as Subaru went inside. After the sun's glare on the stone paving outside, the interior of the cafe was dim.

"Welcome to Inamura's." The waitress bowed to him, indicating a single table near the door. "If you would wish to be seated—"

"I've arranged to meet a friend here. I believe he might already—" He spotted Omi in the back of the room. "There he is."

"I'll bring you a menu immediately." The waitress smiled.

Omi got up when he spotted him. Subaru was still the head of his clan... the fallen head... the... whatever he officially was now. Or would be.

"Good afternoon, Omi-san. There's no need to be standing up. I apologize to have kept you waiting."

"You didn't," Omi hurried to say, actually pulling out a chair for him. "In fact, I was early." Subaru sat down. The waitress offered the menu with a deeper bow than before, apparently judging him by Omi's politeness. Embarrassed, Subaru took the card and studied it, settling on plain coffee. "Would you like something, too?" he asked Omi.

"A mocha, please."

"Yes, sir." The waitress bowed when Subaru handed her the menu back. "Thank you." Omi's gaze followed her.

The garden on the other side of the window was verdantly green. A small weeping sakura occupied its center in a circle of brushed white stones, surrounded by neatly cut grass and assorted flowering plants. A few of the sakura blossoms had already fallen, creating dark-pink spots on white stones and green grass. Dark-pink. Not crimson, not white.

Subaru turned his attention back to the room and caught Omi craning his neck to peer into his collar. "Should I remove my shirt for a better view, Omi-san?" he asked calmly.

Omi flushed a deep red. "I'm sorry, Subaru-san. I—" he stuttered and stopped with an embarrassed laugh. "Your grandmother was very insistent."

"I quite believe that." Subaru sighed. "I assure you there's no reason for it."

They fell silent. A carafe of iced water and two glasses were brought to their table, followed by their coffee.

"You had a case yesterday?" Subaru started with a safe topic after the waitress was gone again.

Omi nodded, relieved. "I was called to investigate a possible succubus down in Musashino-shi. The suspect was a young girl, three-years-old. Her father was very alarmed by the kind of sensations his daughter had begun to evoke in him."

"Three years is young for an active succubus," Subaru commented, reaching for his coffee.

"Yes, that's why I interviewed the father first, but his descriptions were conclusive. I was waiting with him for his wife and daughter to come home when we got a call around half past eight. They had been found dead near the cram school the girl attended." He poured a glass of iced water and sipped from it briefly; the icicles clicked faintly, revealing the tremor in his hand. "Please forgive me if I don't go into details; my Maya isn't much older. It's hard to see a young girl's chest being torn—"

"What happened to the mother?" Subaru asked. The coffee in his cup was pitch black, its smell bitter; he stirred sugar and cream into it. A succubus could leave the stains he'd spotted on Seishiro's shirt yesterday...

"Heart attack. The police believes it happened when she saw her daughter being killed." Omi put his water down and folded his hands neatly. "I'm not sure I believe that. I examined the location and there was no lingering spirit — in fact, not even a lingering sensation, as if the place had been deeply purified."

"It probably was." Subaru put his spoon aside. "He had a job yesterday and he works neatly."

Omi blanched. "You mean the Sakurazukamori—"

"Yes."

"I can't even begin to imagine how it is to be forced to stay with the— the antagonist."

"Ant—?" Subaru couldn't help but laugh. "Sakurazuka Seishiro may be a lot of things, but he isn't the Anti-Christ."

"But he is still our enemy. A murderer!"

Subaru sobered. "I've come to the conclusion that the Sumeragi take that enmity a lot more seriously than the Sakurazuka. And do you know who gives him his orders? Do you even *want* to know who it is?" He took up his cup and had a first sip; the coffee was still bitter. "Omi-san. As things are right now, we — Sakurazuka and I — have no choice but to get along somehow. There is no escape from this. The marks don't force us to stay together all the time, but five hundred kilometers are just too much. We both have a tight schedule to keep up with and are tired enough just to want to rest in the evening." He shrugged. "It's not easy, but not as dreadful as you seem to believe."

"Be careful to whom you speak like this," Omi said solemnly. "Your position within the clan isn't as secure as it once was. Right now, the elders are divided about what is more important: your honored position as a sacred source of the revitalized Dao or the shameful disgrace of your impurity from living with the Sakurazukamori."

"Who *is* the other source of the Dao." Subaru laughed, humorless. "So what is your opinion? Am I beyond reason because I accept the things as they are?"

Omi sipped from his mocha. "Did you really take him along on your jobs?"

"Yes." Subaru sighed. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to work at all."

"Aren't you worried about revealing our secrets to an enemy of the house? Who knows what he learned about our arts while following you around." Omi drew a deep breath and folded his hands in front of him on the place set. "In fact, that's probably the greatest concern of the elders, right along with the danger of you being unwittingly manipulated by him."

Subaru reached for his cup. "They are probably more concerned about me being *wittingly* manipulated."

Omi avoided his eyes. "Whatever the man is to you, he is a master of onmyojutsu. I'm uneasy about the Sakurazukamori discovering our techniques as well."

Subaru took a large sip of his coffee, actually seeking the bitter tang before answering that. "Do you ever think of what I learn about him in return?" he asked, forcing himself to remain calm. "The Sumeragi aren't alone in having secrets. These—" He raised his scarred hand, reminding Omi of the marks. "—are at the very core of the Sakurazuka magic. And while I don't have to show him anything, *he* has to teach me about it."

"Black magic isn't appropriate art for the head of the Sumeragi," Omi returned stiffly.



Subaru snorted. "Magic is a tool. Yin and Yang are two sides of a whole. Which is white and which is black depends solely on how and for what it is used." He fixed Omi squarely, noticing clearly the uneasiness in his distant relative, and asked directly: "Are the elders accusing me of moral corruption? Has it come that far?"

Omi avoided his eyes. "No, Subaru-san. Not... yet. But they are understandably worried."

"As am I." Subaru leaned back in his seat. "About their apparent lack of knowledge regarding the basics of our art in a situation I can't end just like that."

The silence lasted. Outside, the schoolgirls packed up their belongings and wandered off towards the park. The door chimed when an elderly woman entered.

"Subaru-san," Omi asked finally. "Are you even looking for a way out?"

Subaru was quiet for a moment longer, then he sought Omi's gaze again.

"As much as Sakurazuka is." He signaled the waitress for the bill.

"My train goes in forty minutes from Ueno Station." Omi glanced at his watch. "I think I'll go on foot instead of taking the Yamanote."

"I'll accompany you." Subaru signed the bill presented discretely in a black leather folder and stood, pushing his chair back. "We won't have to hurry if we cross through the park."

"Don't your... scars hinder you?" Omi asked cautiously, holding the door for him. "I don't want to inconvenience you."

"You don't." Subaru stepped outside and blinked briefly in the late afternoon sun. "I wouldn't risk going to Odaiba or into Edogawa without a warning right now, but Ueno..." he shrugged. "I told you the marks don't force us to stick together all the time."

"I see..."

They crossed the Kototoi-dori and after a few hundred meters entered the half-shadows of the park. The young leaves were still thin, creating a colorful play of greenish shadows and orange-tinged sunlight. Subaru chose a safe path past the Tokyo National Museum and the fountains, avoiding the ancient trees in the park's depths. They kept a good pace.

"Do you come here often?" Omi asked casually.

"Occasionally. It's either Ueno Station or Uguisudani and if you arrive at Ueno Station, this is more convenient than heading up to the Yamanote tracks and getting into one of their crowded cars. It also allows for regular visits at Bentendo Hall."

Omi nearly missed a step. "You worship Benzaiten?!"

"I pay her respects," Subaru corrected; he stopped to look at the waterplays of the grand fountain, at the rainbows dancing among its jets when their height changed. Benzaiten was the goddess of all that flowed... water... words... knowledge... dreams... He shook himself free. "Last December, her power saved his Majesty the Emperor. Because she is knowledge, her word permeates everywhere. Trapped Within you can't call Amaterasu, but Benzaiten still hears you." He glanced briefly at Omi beside him. "She heard me." With a hoarse cry a white swan sailed past; wings spread wide as it landed on the green waters of the fountain pool. Subaru turned away from the hedge. The swan was Benzaiten's holy animal; it was also the shikigami of a Sakurazukamori who wasn't as gone as a fourteen-hundred-year-old spirit was supposed to be. "We better hurry. Or you'll miss your train in the end."

Police sirens blared shortly after they'd taken the turn past the National Museum of Western Art towards the Koen exit of Ueno Station. Blue-uniformed personnel swarmed the area, stretching yellow warning tape across the path, ushering spectators away. "This area is closed to the public. Please use a different exit, pl—"

"Sumeragi Subaru-san? Is that you?" A burly plain-clothed man was coming toward them.

Subaru bowed politely as he recognized him. "Detective Kono-san."<sup>35</sup>

Kono sighed. "Please don't tell me there's a spiritual disturbance—" His cell phone shrilled; he glanced at the display. "The chief. Excuse me for a moment." He signaled his uniformed colleagues to let them be and turned away from them for the call.

"Yes sir, the crime happened right in front of Ueno Station, opposite the Koen exit." Kono laid a beefy hand over his right ear. "No. Right outside the zone covered by the surveillance cams. Barely a meter outside their range."

Omi leaned towards Subaru. "Shouldn't we be going?" But Subaru quietly shook his head.

The detective's voice became louder, almost agitated. "I doubt that. Too controlled. Whoever did that knew exactly what he was doing. And where." He listened attentively to the caller. "No, I don't think—" Kono winced and held the phone briefly further away from his ear. "No sir, I won't rule that out without having a

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35 Detective Kono and the Nakano Subway murders are featured in Tokyo Babylon OVA 2.

medium check out the scene. Yes, sir. Forensics is already waiting and—" Kono sighed as he looked at the phone, then pocketed it and returned his attention to Subaru. "So. Is there spiritual trouble about?"

Subaru smiled inwardly at the blunt question. Kono-san hadn't changed much in the last eight years. "Do you expect any, detective?" he asked in return.

"It's senior detective now." Kono scratched his head. "And actually, I wouldn't be surprised, given the circumstances of this case," he said gruffly. "And that you pop up in addition..."

"I'm just passing by," Subaru assured him. "I live in Sakuragi now. Omi here was visiting me and I am bringing him to the station. His train goes in twenty minutes," he added.

Omi bowed briefly. "Omi Tono. Onmyoji associated with the Sumeragi."

Kono frowned. "Don't you assist our colleagues in the west?"

"Yes, occasionally," Omi nodded. "I'm from Okutama."

"Hm." Kono grunted. "We might solve both our problems at once." He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "We have a body, obvious murder if you ask me, right in front of Ueno Station at the park entrance. If you two checked the scene and wrote me a clearance, I could send forensics to work and you just might catch that train of yours."

"Of course we will assist you." Subaru glanced at Omi, then nodded. "Please show us the way."

"I know that you've seen your fair share of bloodshed already, but I'd still like to warn you," Kono told Subaru, while leading them to the scene of crime. "This is one of the worst cases I've had in my career."

"I understand." Subaru slowed a bit while he took one of his ofuda out of his shirt pocket. "Please don't be worried on my beh—" He stopped at the sight of the corpse. Omi at his side reflexively uttered a mantra to Amida Buddha.

It was late and they had the sun at their backs. The first row of trees in Ueno Park threw long shadows towards the station. The body lay on the last meter of the pavement. Blood had pooled around it, trickled along the gaps between the stone slates. Blossoms stuck to the blood and the fist-sized hole gaping in the man's chest. Pale pink sakura blossoms, their petals almost as large as five-hundred yen coins. Seishiro had been in no condition to work today...

Subaru took a step forward, blocking Omi's access. "I'd like to do this by myself. Omi-san, would you be so kind as to keep detective Kono from interfering?"

Omi nodded silently and Subaru crossed the last meters to the corpse cautiously. Behind him, he heard Omi whispering, explaining the general procedure to an uneasy Kono.

Subaru's ofuda glowed in the spirit world and in its light he found the three of them surrounded by rows upon rows of the ghosts of Samurai fallen in the Boshin war. Having spilled their blood for their honor and their Shogun, they respected strength, but they would kill him should he dare to threaten them. Not that he believed he could, given the handicap of the marks. Slowly, he knelt beside the corpse, studying the victim: a salaryman, comparatively young, wearing the usual dark suit and a shirt that had been a subtle shade of blue before most of it was soaked crimson. His face was distorted in a death mask of disbelief and pain; he had to have seen his killer.

The spirit of a deceased lingered up to three days before it moved on, if it weren't persuaded to go on earlier. So where was that spirit? Subaru took a second ofuda, dipped it into the blood on the victim's chest. Kono protested, something about evidence, about contamination. Omi was talking frantically...

The rows of ghosts opened in front of him, freeing his view to what they had come to guard here. And at once, Subaru knew he wouldn't learn the killer's identity, wouldn't even persuade this spirit to move on. For that a spirit needed to listen, needed to think, to answer...

...and somebody had made sure that it wouldn't. Subaru felt sick as the ghost staggered towards him, ephemeral hands stretched out blindly in front of a quivering, slowly fading body. Long threads of spiritual essence trailed behind it, flowing from the ragged stump of its throat where the head had been ripped off. Whatever the victim had seen, it was lost. Its blinded spirit would dissipate over the years in the spirit world, never to be reborn.

Subaru bowed his head in acceptance. All he could do was end the suffering. The mantra was swift, sung in hard, biting cadences. His ofuda glowed an icy white in his hand before he tossed it at the spot it had touched on the body left behind. There was no scream, no outcry as the spiritual essence was torn, scattered, its fragments bleeding to nothing in a couple of heartbeats.

One of the ghost warriors took a step towards him, laying his hand on the hilt of the katana he still wore even in death. He nodded. Once. And the whole army...

...was gone. Subaru drew a deep breath and whispered a prayer of compassion, before he folded his remaining ofuda neatly back into his pocket.

"The area is clean. It is safe to send the examiners in," he said quietly, as he returned to Kono and Omi. "I don't have the official forms with me, but if you have pen and paper..." He accepted the small notebook and wrote a brief note, which he signed before handing everything back. "I'll send the documents to the MPD first

thing tomorrow. And Kono-san—" He chose his words carefully. "Somebody powerful was involved in this. Somebody ruthless."

Kono narrowed his eyes. "Somebody like you?"

Subaru nodded. "But Omi and I were at the Inamura Shouzo cafe from three o'clock this afternoon until about thirty minutes ago."

"Can you prove that?"

"I think so." He fingered a small slip of blue-printed paper from his wallet. "The receipt should show the time. I'm sure the waitress remembers us as well."

Kono nodded, gruffly. "We'll check that. Until then, keep yourselves available for us. How can we reach you?"

"Via the main estate's number. It's the fastest way, really." He gave the detective one of his business cards. Kono frowned at it. "You said you moved close-by. What's your address now?"

Subaru sighed, took the card and scribbled it on the back. "Please keep this confidential," he asked, returning it. "People like me tend to get unwelcome attention."

"I understand." Kono pocketed the card. "But please remember that for the time being you two are suspects. Make sure we can reach you." He looked at Omi. "I'll need your address as well."

"Of course." Omi handed him a business card. "No recent changes. You may also reach me on my cell phone."

"Good. We'll call you."

"Your... cohabitant's work?" Omi asked in a low voice after they'd left the hearing range of the cops.

Subaru shook his head. "Definitely not."

"Are you sure? The blood was still fresh; there certainly was enough time while we were at the cafe and..."

Subaru raised his hand, indicating the pentagram. "I'd know." He threw a brief glance back at the park, thinking of a young man's spirit now gone forever. "And that..." He shook his head. "It's just not his style."

Omi looked at him thoughtfully. "You asked for my opinion about you earlier. I'd like to answer that question now." He turned his back to the crowded Koen entrance of Ueno station. "You have changed, Subaru-san. I'm happy for you."

"Happy?" Subaru asked, disbelieving.

"Allow me to phrase it like this: Until recently, the thirteenth head of my clan was somebody who worked hard, who functioned, but if you looked closer at him, he just wasn't there. He didn't care about himself, but you can't care about the whole without caring for yourself. Now you do care and you're cautious about it, wary even, like you have something you don't want to lose. Like you know what losing it means." He bowed briefly at Subaru. "I'll contact your grandmother and tell her accordingly. But be aware of the elders. They will call on you soon."

Subaru stood dead-still. Omi was gone, probably already on his train home, but his carefully chosen words seemed to reverberate in the din of the people going in and out of the station in front of him, passing him on both sides.

*"Like you have something you don't want to lose."*

*"Like you know what losing it means."*

Was that true? Did he really not want to lose Seishiro? Seishiro and their weird not-quite-stated truce of sorts?

*"Maybe I'm just another illusion."*

But what if he wasn't? What—

"Do you need help?" A station official in the typical blue uniform addressed him, looking concerned.

Subaru blinked. "No, sir." He shook his head. Again. "I'm fine." *And beyond help already.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

20:46

Subaru sat down with the forms at the kitchen table after Seishiro had retreated to the living room again. Earlier, they'd had rice with chicken broth for dinner. Nothing fancy, but it was easy to make with instant stock. Subaru had cleared the table afterwards and the dishwasher was running now.

A spiritual clearance certification was a standard form; Subaru had issued thousands already. He swiftly filled in his name and the date, time and place of the incident:

~Sumeragi Subaru — April 9, 2000, ca. 15:30 — Ueno Station exit of Ueno Park, Ueno-cho, Taito-ku, Tokyo~

Reason for clearance being required:

~Violent homicide on location~

The police would have precise descriptions anyway. He re-read the form, added his personal seal, and put his contact address and phone number underneath. Yes, that should do, except...

He added a brief warning about a powerful practitioner being involved in the crime, before he folded the form neatly and sealed it in the envelope. He'd drop it off at the nearest police box tomorrow. He stretched and went to put the envelope in his coat pocket. A bluish flicker and faint music coming from the half-closed living room door told him that Seishiro had found something on tv.

*"...time flows on endlessly, while whispering that everything is illusion..."*

Time was running out, and nothing was an illusion.

Subaru entered the living room just in time to see the show's title displayed on the screen: ~Salaryman Kintaro~. Wasn't that the flick Sorata had talked endlessly about? Surely, Seishiro wouldn't—?

"The pilot of season two," Seishiro told him from his place on the couch behind him. "And you aren't transparent." He pulled his legs closer, freeing an end of the couch.

Feet in smooth dark grey socks nudged against Subaru's thigh after he sat down, seeking the warmth between him and the cushion. One of the legs of Seishiro's burgundy cotton pants had ridden up his ankle a little. The actor on the screen played a salaryman with a small son and apparently some yakuza background, reminding Subaru of this afternoon's victim, of the mutilated spirit he'd scattered into nothingness...

*Someone powerful. And ruthless.*

He felt cold; the toes pressing under his thigh were warm, solid. After a moment, he leaned against Seishiro's legs, resting his shoulder against Seishiro's knees.

22:21

Seishiro had dozed on and off during the program already, so Subaru feigned a yawn and went to bed over an hour before their usual time. Fifteen minutes later, he lay curled up on his side of the bed, resting his cheek on his hand, and pretended to be asleep while Seishiro slipped under the cover on the other side; his slightly irregular breathing became deeper and slower quickly, mixing with the faint humming of the dead protecting the house.

For a moment Subaru thought he recognized some of the voices from the park. Their song was strong, melodious. But who could employ the dead for a task like—?

Subaru started when the phone shrilled suddenly. He sat up just in time to see Seishiro groping across the nightstand for the phone, snatching it off the hold and—

"What?!" A brief pause and— "Yours." Seishiro tossed the cordless over to his side of the bed.

Subaru barely managed to catch the receiver before it slipped over the edge. "Hello? This is Sumeragi Subaru speaking."

=Subaru-san? Is that really you?=  
"Grandmother?" he inquired, surprised.

Seishiro pulled the cover up over his ears and grumbled something like "Tell her office hours are nine to five."

"What happened?" Subaru asked, covering the receiver with his hand and turning his back to him.

=It's the ninth of the month. I just questioned the fires about your future again.= There was a faint quiver in her voice that could mean only—

"What did you see that upset you so, grandmother?"

=I am not upset, Subaru-san. I am quite joyful. You will take the Sakura into the light!=  
=

## Interregnum 5

CLAMP Campus, Tokyo  
University Hospital  
April 10, 2000 — 11:16 [Monday]

*Hospitals are all the same*, Kamui thought grimly as he left the elevator on the specified floor. The small reception was deserted and so he searched down the corridor for the room number Akechi-sensei had given him on the phone. *They have pale washed walls, grey linoleum floor with white sideboards, and smell of disinfectant.* He'd been in these places too often; for himself, for Sorata. For Subaru. He spotted the right number and knocked. No answer. He tried the door handle. Open. "Ake—?" He stopped. *They don't have a whole wall painted with parrots...; chirping parrots even—*

*No. That's—* Kamui found himself staring at Akechi. The doctor stood at the open window, surrounded by a swarm of sparrows picking crumbs out of his open hands. *Parrots. Sparrows...* Kamui gave up. "Are they tame?" If he was insane, he could at least indulge his curiosity.<sup>36</sup>

Akechi looked over his shoulder at him, the morning sun outside caught in his glasses; the reflexes obscured his eyes. "No, Kamui-kun, they're just hungry. As always." He smiled and scattered the remaining crumbs across the window sill, before he went to the small sink in the corner of his office. Behind him the window sill disappeared under a fluttering wave of little brown bodies, while he cleaned his hands. "I'm glad you found my office. I was afraid you'd gotten lost."

"Um, doctor—" Kamui pointed at Akechi's head where a small brown sparrow clung stubbornly to the doctor's hair. "There's one left."

"Ignore him!" Akechi said cheerfully, tossing the towel onto the edge of the sink. "I'm sure he'll leave when it gets too boring. So, how are you feeling?"

"Uh... feeling?" Kamui couldn't help staring at the sparrow ruffling its feathers in Akechi's hair. "Isn't that unhygienic?"

"Feelings?" Akechi appeared surprised. "Not in the least, it's perfectly normal and healthy to have them and—"

"I meant the bird."

"Oh that." The doctor shooed the sparrow off his head and finally closed the window. "Better now?" He smiled. "Don't worry about hygiene; I've fed them for twenty-five years now. If anything were to happen, I'm confident it would have happened already." He indicated a narrow hospital bed behind a movable screen. "Shall we?"

"As if I have a choice." Kamui unbuttoned his jacket and shrugged out of it, draping it over the foot end.

"Please sit down and roll up your sleeve." Akechi put a small steel tray with a rubber thing and vials, needles and bottles on the bed next to him. "I want to make sure there's no hidden infection." He deftly attached a disposable one-way-needle to an orange colored plastic stub with which he connected a finger long transparent plastic vial.

Kamui shrugged and pushed his sleeve up. The tourniquet was made of soft yellow rubber and the closing strap creaked as Akechi pulled it tight. "Make a fist, please. Firmly. — Good." Another creak. Kamui felt his pulse under the tourniquet as it pressed into his arm...

*...tying him to the broken roof top. Steel cut into his skin, while Subaru fought, suffered. "I don't want anybody else to die in front of me!" Wires sliced his limbs as he leaped. "Subaru!" he screamed and...*

*...looked at pale yellow rubber dangling harmlessly from his upper arm. The screen had toppled over and Akechi was on the floor a few steps away from him, slowly rising to one knee, watching him cautiously. He was talking, but it took time for his words to make sense.*

"...all right, Kamui-kun. It's just a blood sample; nobody's going to die here and Subaru-san isn't even here now, but I'm sure he's all right wherever he is at the moment. We can give him a call if that helps you feel better."

"I—" Kamui stared at him. The doctor's green slacks were torn over the right knee. There was blood on the skin underneath. Akechi winced when he put weight on that leg. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't want to hurt you. I— I just—"

"I understand," Akechi said calmly. He tested his leg again and gave him an encouraging smile. "Don't worry about it. I've had worse in my time. Do you think we can take the sample now?"

Kamui ran his hand through his hair, making a face when the scar the Shinken had left in his palm pulled at his skin. "Yeah... I'm fine, I... guess."

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36 Akechi and the birds: see "Man of Many Faces" book 1, pages 99-104 (Event 4).

~::~::~~

Osaka Itami Airport  
South Terminal Gate 13 Waiting Lounge  
11:22

"You have seat 36C. Boarding starts in twenty minutes at gate thirteen, sir." The young woman at the service counter gave him his boarding card and indicated the waiting lounge. "Have a nice flight."

Ameru nodded politely and took a seat in one of the wire chairs arranged around small round tables. Laying his coat over the telescope handle of his hand trolley, he looked out the panorama windows next to the still blocked gangway. It was a sunny day; the light glistened on the tarmac and the white-and-blue airplane at the gate. There were comparatively few passengers, but then it was Monday and Okinawa was still more a holiday and weekend destination compared to Osaka. Or Kyoto.

Kyoto. He'd known it meant trouble when he was ordered back to the main house, but the truth was way worse than anything he'd believed possible. He raised his shoulders against the sudden chill. He was glad to return to Naha. Still...

It would have been nice to see him in person — at least from afar. Ameru sighed as he took his picture wallet out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket. The slim black leather case was worn at the edges and one of its seams had been mended in slightly irregular stitches, but he'd never got around to replace it. Okinawa's sweltering summers had glued the few photos in it to the insides of their plastic sheaths. If he took the pictures out now, he'd risk damaging them.

His finger trailed over the snapshot of a young man lighting a cigarette on a busy shopping street in Ginza, unaware of the photograph being taken<sup>37</sup>. It was one of the pictures that shouldn't exist. Ameru knew he shouldn't have gone to Tokyo last spring, but Kamui had been only fifteen, had seen his mother burn to death. It had been impossible not to care whether the boy was provided for. Tokyo had nearly twelve million inhabitants; the chance to accidentally spot Subaru should have been nil, yet there he'd been. He'd appeared sad, resigned. At twenty-five. When had he started smoking? Was that the reason why his clothes seemed to be too wide for his lean frame or was he still such a poor eater? Sachiko had always worried about his lack of appetite...

Ameru flipped back to one of the oldest pictures, barely daring to touch the edge of the sheath holding it. Sachiko, laughing, trying to free her shoulder-long hair from the determined grip of her daughter, while her son slept peacefully curled up in her lap. Initially, he'd wanted the four of them in the photo, but then he'd just hit the trigger at Sachiko's laughter. Her face was slightly blurred from his daughter's enthusiastic tugging. The picture was blinded at two spots where the lacquer had stuck to the plastic sheath, still...

A few months later the initial tests had revealed his son's gift and the elders hadn't hesitated to demand Subaru's education by the house — exclusive education. He'd protested, but to no avail. Sachiko's tears that morning were etched in his soul, like the angry screams of his daughter. They hadn't been interested in her, but in the end had accepted her as well, because she calmed his son's upset crying...

"She'll protect him," Sachiko had whispered in his arms, again and again in the nights that followed, biting her hand. Ameru closed his fist until his hand trembled. He should have fought back then, should have insisted, should have— He'd been twenty-eight; two years older than his son was now. He returned to the first picture. Sad eyes, more grey than green; sad and resigned. At twenty-five.

He flipped the case closed and put it safely back into his jacket before he stood and took his trolley to the service counter. "Excuse me, miss. I've changed my mind. My seat number is 36C and I am not going to board this flight."

~::~::~~

Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department  
Homicide Division  
13:28

"Sumeragi's alibi is rock-solid." Detective Kobayashi Ryusuke<sup>38</sup>, Kono's junior partner, closed the door to their small office, juggling a stack of files and a paper mug.

"I expected as much." Kono, after looking up briefly, returned his attention to the file in front of him. "The clearance certificate came in early today, just as he promised."

37 The snapshot in Ameru's picture wallet is in CLAMP's "X - Zero (new edition)" Artbook on page 101 (upper left corner). Or on Aethereality at <http://gallery.aethereality.net/download.php?id=371>.

38 Kobayashi Ryusuke is three years older than Nokoru and Seishiro and stars in Man of Many Faces, where he very unsuccessfully hunts the 3rd Nijyo Menso (a.k.a Ijyuin Akira).

"I was rather surprised that he insisted on performing the spiritual clearance himself." Kobayashi put the mug on his desk opposite Kono's and sat down. "Omi Tono is a certified police adviser and—"

"He's the clan head of the Sumeragi, Kobayashi-kun. Their boss."

"Exactly."

"I think it's probably because of his sister. Ueno Park is where the only trace about her was ever found."

"She's missing?"

"Most certainly dead since 1991, but they never found her body."

"Then how come—"

"They found her brother's ceremonial robes soaked with her blood in Ueno Park. Tears in the fabric revealed that she'd been run through with a blunt paddle-like object. Because of lung tissue on the back of the robe and the amount of blood soaked into it, forensics declared it a possible homicide. The case is officially still open, but nobody's working on it. And after almost nine years..." Kono sighed and swiveled around to stare out the window at the busy Sakurada-dori. "Sumeragi never really recovered from it."

"A blunt paddle-like object... where did I read that before?" Kobayashi asked aloud, frowning.

"In our current case file," Kono said dryly.

"Wait a minute, Sumeragi's sister was killed like our victim? And in her brother's robes? Did anybody check his alibi for that?"

Kono snorted. "He was in a coma vigil after what his family declared to be a spiritual assault a month earlier. He woke around the time her presumed death was reported."

"Which hospital?"

"None. His family attended him at home at his apartment in Shinjuku."

"Convenient." Kobayashi shook his head, flipping through the file.

"I knew him before her death, Kobayashi-kun. He was a shy child, always going out of his way to help people. He'd never have been able to harm his twin."

"Still, this is the second time his name comes up with a crime like that. I can't help it; that's suspicious."

Kono sighed. "Not half as suspicious as what forensics is trying to feed us." He shoved the open file across his desk towards his partner's. "Apparently, cherry blossoms aren't just cherry blossoms."

"Please?" Kobayashi pulled the file close and studied the indicated passage. "*Prunus speciosa*," he read aloud.

"I called Tokyo University's botany department about it." Kono nodded towards the phone. "Apparently, what we all know as sakura these days, is actually a hybrid of various older sakura species developed in Yoshino about a hundred years ago. These Yoshino sakura are what grows everywhere across Tokyo nowadays. But the flowers sticking to our victim are from Oshima sakura, a much older variant that's been around since the thirteenth century or longer."

"Did you check if there are any of those trees near the crime scene?"

"Not personally. But the park department told me the area in front of the station was replanted after the Great Kanto Earthquake." Kono tossed his pen onto the desk. "With Yoshino cherries."

"And deeper inside the park?"

"They wouldn't rule it out, but even if there are some; the flowers were only around the body."

"Doesn't make sense." Kobayashi sighed. "And think of the thunderstorms ten days ago. Yoshino, Oshima, whatever — hanami ended very early this year. So where did those blossoms come from?"

"Good question. Another one would be why nobody saw a salaryman being run through with a paddle..."

"A blunt paddle-like object," Kobayashi corrected. "According to forensics, it could even be a flat hand if somebody had the strength."

"Yeah, and next you'll tell me the Sakurazukamori is wandering around Ueno Park!" Kono snorted. "This isn't the X-files."

"I know. Otherwise, I'd have caught Nijyo Menso and—"

The phone rang. "Senior detective Kono." He raised his hand, silencing Kobayashi and hastily scribbled something on a notepad. "Got it. On our way, sir." He hung up. "We've got another one. Blossoms and all."

"Where?" Kobayashi clipped his badge to his pocket as they hurried out the door.

"Kabuki-cho. Shinjuku."

~::~::~~

Shinjuku, Kabuki-cho, Tokyo

19:26

Romiro wiped himself clean and dropped the cloth next to the used rubber between the woman's spread legs, before adjusting himself in his underwear. There was blood on the bed, his purchase still unconscious. He snorted and closed his pants and belt. One should assume Kabuki-cho's professionals were better trained in their job. He took his coat and showed himself out.

It was barely after sunset when he stepped down onto the neon-lit street into the early evening crowd of people seeking their own pleasure — or just the thrill of pleasure being around to be had; mere spectators. He suspected Seishiro to have been among the latter, though probably in the district on the other side of the Yasukuni-dori. A waste. Seishiro's former animal clinic certainly lay conveniently close. Romiro crossed through under the red neon arc spanning the street entrance and entered the more mundane area with apartment houses, business complexes, a health center. The yellow police tape still blocked off the sidewalk in front of it, crackling in the evening wind.

He whistled to himself. Ueno. Minato. Shinjuku. Three of the five tips of the sealing pentagram were already marked with the dead flesh and spilled blood of those who now served to cloud the spirit world. Two of the bodies had already been found, but that had no influence on the spell; the clouding was independent of the corpses. Once the remaining tips in Koto and Shibuya were marked, he could trigger the spell and Kasumigaseki would be sealed. It held a certain irony that one of the designated locations lay directly in front of one of Seishiro's former hide-outs. The place now offered abortions instead of castrations; cure instead of prevention. Romiro chuckled. In a way, he was going to do the same for the Mori. Seishiro was a fool if he believed they didn't know how to handle a rogue Sakurazukamori.

Romiro dug his hands in his suit pockets as the wind tore at his jacket and hair. The shadow of a large crow flitted past him on the asphalt as he walked back to his car; its harsh call ringing out into the falling night.

~::~::~~

CLAMP Campus, Tokyo.  
House of Akechi Shigetaka M.D.  
20:36

Akechi drew a face as he put his cup of tea down on the writing pad of his old mahogany desk and used his foot to pull the desk chair out. He'd treated Kamui-kun and sent him on his way before he closed the laceration on his by then swollen knee with three stitches. He was getting old if such a slip of a teenager got him off his feet that easily. Yes, that slip-of-a-teenager was a 'Kamui', but whatever power the boy had, he hadn't trashed the office in his flashback, had he?

Akechi sighed. He sat relieving his aching knee, and blew at his tea before having a first sip. The file lay still open on the desk. The first trace. In over thirty years. And the DNA data was conclusive. He looked up at the worn photo in the chased gold frame under the green-screened banker's lamp.

It showed a young man in his twenties in front of the former Dai-ichi Seimei building, holding MacArthur's SCAP headquarters in occupied Tokyo. He stood seemingly carefree in midst of the turmoil of soldiers and diplomats and the destruction of Tokyo, laughing into the camera. Wind tore at his wavy hair, threatening to carry off his daringly tilted felt hat and battering the flaps of his trenchcoat. A handwritten note in the lower left corner dated it "Spring 1946". Ijyuin Shigero, the first 'Nijyo Menso'; strangely, the age of the photo had restored the color of his eyes that Akechi would never forget. Neither he nor his brother had inherited the light amber; his were hazel brown and Shigetoshi's were dark.<sup>39</sup>

Akechi trailed a fingertip over the glass covering the picture. He'd been thirteen when his father disappeared in February 1965. He and Shigetoshi had different mothers, even different last names, but they'd been each others support ever since; despite all his faults their father had made sure of that. Seishiro, though, born in April according to his school file, had been left on his own.

Akechi's eyes wandered to another line on the plain, type-written file: *Mother: Sakurazuka Setsuka (deceased 1981); Father: -unknown-. Ward of the State of Japan from 1981 until April 1, 1985.* He thought of the scars he'd seen on his younger brother's body and his apparent dislike of being touched; they would have to be careful about him.

He reached for the phone.

~::~::~~

Setagaya-ku, Shimokitazawa-cho, Tokyo.  
Green Drugstore [business not opened yet]  
April 13, 2000

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39 Ijyuin Shigetoshi is Akechi Shigetaka's older brother, the father of Ijyuin Akira (from the CLAMP Campus detectives) and the second Nijyo Menso (the first one was his and Shigetaka's father, who disappeared without a trace in 1965). He stars in "Man of Many Faces" book 2, pages 85-88 (Event 8).



Kakyo— no, *Kakei*, always Kakei — sat on a rickety chair behind the unlit shop window, looking out at the deserted, dimly lit street. A worm of lights chased from right to left across the dark concrete when the first train rattled past on the elevated tracks above the other side of the street. Small, one-storey shops covered in bright graffiti ducked under the railway there, selling conveniences, groceries, liquor and services.

The first train. 05:13.

Kakei glanced back at the open door to the shop's backroom, where his self-appointed guardian slept noisily on a bed that seemed too short and too narrow for his size. He dragged on the cigarette between his limp fingers, allowing the glowing tip to outshine the streetlamps outside for a moment.

One week ago, he and Saiga had left the hospital, disappearing in the chaos of everyday Tokyo, ending up... here. It had felt right. Strange. In his mind's eye, he had seen snow under the small trees lining the broader avenue two side streets from here, had seen a boy on the verge of freezing and a young man picking him up, bringing him... here. To heal. To learn. To... find answers. Here was right, would be right... next Winter.

He exhaled the smoke and watched the feathered cloud dissipate in the vastness of the still empty shop. They'd set up the shelves over the weekend. The first goods would arrive next week and once they put up the sign...

Kakei chuckled and wondered if Saiga knew what kind of leaf he'd chosen for his drugstore sign. He coughed, releasing more smoke in a thicker, wetter cloud. He probably shouldn't smoke in the first place; his health was fragile enough as it was. Saiga didn't want him to smoke. Not that he cared about that. Kakei dragged at the cigarette again. He was done with caring about others.

Outside the first salarymen staggered, still half asleep, to their cars or the train station. The rattle of metallic wheels being pulled over the uneven sidewalk announced the old woman delivering newspapers.

Shimokitazawa was waking up.

Kakei dropped the rest of his cigarette to the still unswept store floor and crushed the glow under his heel. This had been the third night in a row he'd spent sitting in the shop window after waking up at 2 am. For the third time, he'd dreamed of Hokuto's murderer being stabbed. Either he would warn them today...

...or not at all. Outside, the old lady with the newspapers came around the corner; a small shaggy dog was running around her, yapping. Kakei lit another cigarette.

## 15 — Sun Flare

*A heavy gust of night wind tore through the physical branches of the ancient sakura in Ueno Park, and small leaves, dust, and unripe fruits were torn from the crown and rained onto the grass and the paths. Each year the fruits grew already dry and fell dead from the branches. The Sakura wasn't meant to feed the living, be it animal or prey.*

*Spreading branches quivered, releasing more black husks that nourished nothing. Dark fruits that fell in the world of the living and dissipated in the world of the dead. Tiny, cherry-shaped fragments of darkness no longer large enough to taint a spirit forever, trapped in husks that fell in different years, in different ages — to keep the torn spirits from reuniting — on soil that was now covered in grass...*

*...and had been covered in blood the year the Sakura had come to Tokyo. Harada<sup>40</sup> had been the Sakurazukamori back then. Hot-headed San-chan, who had fought for the Tokugawa in Kyoto and relocated the Sakura when it became obvious that the capital was going to move. As part of the Shogitai he had stood against the Imperial troops when they stormed the hill...<sup>41</sup>*

*The Tree's crown shivered, releasing spiritual blossoms after the very physical fruits earlier.*

*San-chan's battle had raged all around it, drenching the soil in blood. The blood had been heady, exhilarating... and deadly; it had allowed the fallen fruits to unite that year and once-defeated enemies had risen on the battlefield.*

*Tradition demanded that whoever killed a Sakurazukamori took his position when there was no trained successor. At twenty-eight, San-chan had still been young. But a cannon loaded by several men had been fired at hundreds, and shrapnel had torn a blood vessel by accident...*

*...and countless reunited enemy spirits howling around the Sakura's trunk had kept it from reaching out to its guardian. San-chan's Mori had offered it one out of their ranks afterwards...*

*...and the world had become grey.*

*The Tree's branches rustled in the cool night air. For fourteen hundred years, it had had Sakurazukamori. Some for a few months, some for almost the entire lifespan of a human being. For over a hundred years it had allowed puppets to take their place, until a stubborn fifteen-year-old had strolled up to its site, demanding answers his teachers denied him.*

*The fifteen-year-old was a grown man now, and together they were still seeking answers.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
April 13, 2000

Late Thursday morning. The kitchen was filled with the leafy scent of fresh-pressed starfruit juice and orange-flavored rice. Faint music played on the radio. Subaru took another section of orange while covertly trying to assess Seishiro's condition.

Opposite him, Seishiro was studying the morning paper. Since they shared a bed, Subaru knew that he hadn't been feverish in the last two nights, and given the sweet miso soup he'd made to go with today's breakfast rice, he seemed to be doing better. Still...

Seishiro opened a page and folded the paper in the middle, placing it next to the dish to read while eating.

Subaru raised his cup and enjoyed the strong, slightly bitter leaf aroma of green tea spreading over his tongue. He'd canceled several appointments this week, allowing Seishiro to sleep off his fever, and answered the following inquiry from the main house with a caustic comment about still being strained from his unexpected trip to Kyoto. At least, that hadn't been a complete lie, though it had sparked another visit from Omi yesterday.

Seishiro, sipping from his coffee, turned the folded paper over and began reading the second half of the page. Underneath the table his socked foot rested lightly on Subaru's instep, toes wriggling against his ankle. The slight touch felt more comforting than Subaru was willing to admit, despite Seishiro being focused on his paper. Entirely focused. The wriggling stopped.

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40 Harada Sanosuke (\*1840 - July 6, 1868) was the 10th unit captain of the Shinsengumi, a special police force for the Tokugawa regime. He joined the Shogitai in Spring 1868 and died on July 6 1868 at the age of 28 from injuries received during the Battle of Ueno.

41 Battle of Ueno. On July 4th 1868 (the first year of the Meiji era) the "Battle of Ueno" took place between 2000 Shogitai and the new Imperial army. The Shogitai, a group of samurai loyal to the Tokugawa shogunate, protected the last Shogun, Togukawa Yoshinobu, in his self-imposed confinement at Kan'eiji temple on Ueno Hill. The Imperial troops, armed with modern weaponry, bloodily ended the last uprisal of Shogunate forces in Edo (soon to be Tokyo) within a day.

"Excuse me." Seishiro tossed his napkin onto the paper, pushed back his chair and left the room.

Curious, Subaru reached for the paper. He stopped at one of the smaller headlines near the bottom of the page: ~MYSTERIOUS MURDER IN MINATO: Serial killer on the loose?~

The article itself was brief — it wasn't yet front page news — but it spoke of the murder of a tourist guide down in Minato-ku. The woman had been stabbed through the heart, apparently by an unusually thick blunt object. The body had been found littered with sakura blossoms.

*Like the one in Ueno on Sunday.* Was there a mutilated spirit lost in Minato now? Possibly, if the scene hadn't been cleared properly. He should call the police and inquire about that. He stopped at the next paragraph.

~This is the third murder of that kind. The 'Sakurazukamori' had already killed in Ueno, Shinjuku and Minato. Sources within the police told Asahi Shimbun that the investigating detectives secretly named the murderer after an ancient folktale about...~

~::~::~~

Seishiro was in the middle of getting dressed, when Subaru appeared in the bedroom door. Buttoning his shirt, he glanced over his shoulder. "Seeing something you like?"

"Yes," Subaru returned. "Though I'd like it even better if you removed that shirt."

"Too bad I don't have time for that." He stuffed the shirt into his pants, zipped up and closed his belt. Choosing a pair of gold cufflinks engraved with pentagrams from the jewelry drawer, he noticed how loose the collar sat; he'd better use a firm collar pin to secure it.

"You're worried about the article, aren't you?" Subaru finally left the doorway, coming into the room. "About a 'Sakurazukamori' going around in Tokyo."

"Worried is the wrong word." Seishiro slung a dark-red tie around his neck and knotted it in a self-releasing cross-Kelvin. A plain gold clip secured it to the front of the shirt, before he shrugged into his jacket and readjusted the collar pin. "It means trouble."

"You're going to hunt him down," Subaru stated flatly.

"No." Seishiro unlocked the weapons compartment and clipped a narrow Beretta to his belt in the middle of the back, closing the jacket over it. "I'm going to sue him for copyright infringement. The NPSC will love the court statements." He checked the line of his suit in the full-size mirror and replaced the cognac-colored indoor glasses with almost opaque black ones before heading for the door. "If somebody from the Ministry of Home Affairs calls, tell them I'm already on it."

Subaru's hand closed around his wrist when he reached for his keys on the hallway table. "Be careful. There's a powerful practitioner behind this."

"Noted." Seishiro freed his hand with a sharp twist and slipped his keys into the pocket.

"Where are you going?"

"Kasumigaseki, public relations come first." He headed down the stairs and stepped into his shoes, throwing the light coat around his shoulders. "Don't wait for me. This may take a while."

"But you—" The door fell into its lock, into Subaru's words.

Outside, thin high clouds feathered over the sky. Their white haze seemed to intensify the painful glare of the sun on the stones. Seishiro squinted despite his dark glasses. His temples began to throb on his way down to the Kototoi. Normally, he would cross through the park to his car, paying the Tree a visit along the way, but today he'd better catch a train at Uguisudani to save his strength. The fever had depleted his resources more than he liked to admit. Still, the offender had to be tracked down and eliminated immediately. Neither Mori nor NPSC would be happy about the publicity. He pushed his way into a train. It was well past morning rush hour, but the advertisement-plastered cars of the Yamanote were still crowded with people.

One station. And then out of this tin can.

Seishiro drew a deep breath when he headed off the platform at Ueno Station, walking down towards the car park. He checked his wards, finding them untampered. Only a cat had passed through his lot two days ago, chasing a rat. Seishiro unlocked the car, tossed his coat onto the backseat and got behind the wheel. Checking the instruments, he sighed. He'd have to stop for gas on his way to Chiyoda.

~::~::~~

Subaru cleared the kitchen table and started the dishwasher before he fetched his case files from the storage room next to the genkan. He'd have to find a place for a filing cabinet of his own soon; the cardboard box was becoming unfeasibly heavy. He heaved it on to a kitchen chair and put his writing case on the table. A desk would be good, too. He went to check for new faxes, noting, relieved, that there had been no new messages since yesterday. Seishiro's casual clothes were still scattered across the unmade bed. Dark suit,

pastel colored shirt, conservative tie, and discreet jewelry. Seishiro had 'dressed to kill'. Literally. But he wasn't well yet. If something happened...

Subaru sighed. There was nothing he could do about it. Returning to the kitchen, he unbound the tassels securing his writing case and looked through his files. He'd given some of the easier cases this week to Omi yesterday and requested Naoko's help with a seemingly possessed imported birchwood table. As citizens of Yokohama, her branch of the family had more knowledge of the Western culture that might be involved.

Of the two remaining cases, the one at the Metropolitan Government was the more urgent; the other was about apparitions spotted at the reconstruction site of the Sunshine 60 building in Ikebukuro. He was inclined to write the latter off as superstitions.

Sunshine 60 had been built on the site of the former Sugamo prison<sup>42</sup>, which people believed haunted ever since the executions of war criminals there. Tales of Tojo Hideki wandering the grounds with the rope still around his neck had been frequent in those days, but Subaru's grandmother had exorcised the site in 1971 before the construction of the original Sunshine 60 started and the kekkai formed by the building itself would have banished any lingering spirit long before it fell in 1999.

No, the reappearance of Tojo Hideki was likely due to an overactive imagination rather than an actual manifestation. Still, superstition or not, Subaru would have to confirm that. He looked through his calendar. Probably on the way to the Metropolitan Government. And he still had to inquire about the spiritual clearance at the crime scene in Minato; he couldn't rely on Seishiro for that. He had to have Kono's number somewhere...

It took ten minutes for Subaru to find the grimy card near the bottom of his pile of business cards. Taking it to the bedroom, he was about to pick up the phone when it rang.

"Yes?"

=Sumeragi-san?= A quiet, slightly husky voice asked.

"On the line. Who's speaking?"

=You don't know me. I am — was — no, *am* a yumemi. I—=

A *yumemi*? "How did you get this number?" Subaru asked warily.

=I was a Dragon of Earth last year.=

Would they have this number? Subaru didn't think so. Seishiro treated his phone number like a state secret; it probably was one. "That doesn't answer my question. I'm sorry, but if you are indeed—"

=Listen!= The caller snapped. =I loved your sister. It's fine by me if her murderer bites the dust. But she died to ensure your happiness and unfortunately, that happiness requires him! I don't want her death to be in vain. So go! Find him. *Death is meeting his death today!*= The sharp click of a cut connection followed, then the sound of an empty line.

Subaru's thoughts raced. The Earth dreamseer was a force to be reckoned with; his predictions had ruined most of their plans last year. If it really had been him, then the warning was serious... but who could have given him—

Subaru dialed without thinking twice.

=Imonoyama residence.=

"Takamura-san? This is Sumeragi Subaru. May I speak with Imonoyama-san, please?"

=Wait a moment, please.= He was put on hold. Faint music played, a slow, ascending, eerily familiar tune, Subaru couldn't quite n— =Imonoyama. To what do I owe this surprise?=  
"I'm sorry for disturbing you, but did you happen to give anybody this phone number?"

=No, Sumeragi-san. We both know that your... landlord wouldn't permit that.=

*Then how—?*

=But I relayed a call from the former dreamseer of the Dragons of Earth a few minutes ago.=  
*Go. Find him. Death is meeting his death today.*

The phone cluttered on the tabletop. Subaru grabbed keys and coat and threw the door shut behind him.

Kasumigaseki, Seishiro had said. There was a direct line to Chiyoda from Nishi Nippori station. Subaru squeezed himself through the overgrown iron gate onto the Yanaka cemetery. The graveyard was almost deserted at this time on a workday. Pale stones, engraved with black and gold, gleamed in the sun. It was hot and shadows were scarce. The foliage of the trees was still thin. Birds seemed strangely absent. *I was in love with your sister*, the Earth dreamseer had claimed. How had he met her? When? Where? Why hadn't Hokuto-chan mentioned him? He'd thought they shared everything, but now—

*She died for your happiness.*

Subaru balled his fist; his pace quickened until he was nearly running. Running on a graveyard. His grandmother would exorcise him. To save the murderer of his sister. Exorcise him twice. But Hokuto was dead and Seishiro was alive. Had to be alive. Had to—

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42 Sugamo Prison was used by the American occupation forces to incarcerate some of the convicted Japanese war criminals, and was the site of the execution of those sentenced to death, including high profile prisoners.

~::~::~~

Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo

Seishiro pulled onto the small parking lot opposite the Sakuradamon. Three of its dozen slots were reserved for 'Sakura Enterprises'; the others belonged to the office of the Supreme Public Prosecutor and the Ministry of Justice next door. He parked his car in the middle space — the one that didn't face a tree in the narrow flower bed separating it from the Uchibori-dori — and turned off the engine. It was midday by now. The sun was blindingly bright on the concrete; the rhododendron in front of his car was a vague silhouette in its glare. By now, the headaches were making their comeback with a vengeance. Normally, he wouldn't go anywhere near the office in such a condition, but—

*"The investigating detectives secretly named the murderer 'the Sakurazukamori'."*

Not secret enough, Seishiro thought grimly, throwing a dark glare towards the Metropolitan Police Department as he got out of his car. The air smelled of azaleas, exhaust fumes and the dank banks of the moat on the other side of the street. The mingling scents reminded him strangely of decaying corpses.

"Sakurazuka-san."

Seishiro raised his head at the unwelcome voice. For a moment the sun blinded him despite his glasses. "Romiro." He acknowledged his chief operations officer with a brief nod.

"It's fortunate we meet here; the current unpleasant situation is better discussed outside of walls which might have ears."

"In the midday heat and in plain sight of the MPD?" Seishiro closed the door of his car with force. "I think not."

Romiro squinted against the sun in his eyes. Seishiro tensed. Something was off, something he couldn't quite— "Let's take this inside and—"

—white-hot pain pierced his back.

"You shouldn't have broken the rules, Sei-kun," Romiro said in the dark behind him.

~::~::~~

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
Chiyoda Subway Line  
12:15

=Next station Nijubashimae. Thank you for riding Chiyoda-sen. Please be careful not to leave anything behind when you exit at Nijubashimae. Thank you for—=

The electronic voice was drowned out when a sudden wave of foul fog gushed through the subway car, throwing Subaru against the grab pole beside him. It stank of corpses. He couldn't breathe, couldn't— The sigil scars on his hands flashed violently, almost burning his skin with icy blue light, then—

—nothing. The train rattled on. Three girls in school uniforms eyed him warily before moving into the next car. The old woman with a shopping bag between her feet next to him grabbed her umbrella more tightly. Ashamed, he avoided her eyes. A spiritual event; he'd been the only one to notice it. But if he had caught it, then Seishiro—

He reached for his marks, sought the reassurance of Seishiro's presence in the distance, and pain raced through his back, pierced his chest. There was blood in his mouth, his throat. He was drowning in it. Feathers swished in the air above his head. The beating of strong wings. A hawk's cry for battle. The caw of a crow. He—

—slammed his shields shut. For a few moments he just clung to the pole pressing into his shoulder, catching his breath. Late. He was late. And close. The train was leaving the station, was gaining speed...

=Next station Hibiya. Thank you for—=

Two more minutes. *Let me be in time*, he prayed. *Amaterasu-kami-sama, I beg you, let me be in time.*

He leaped out of the train the moment the doors opened. Hurrying over the crowded platform, he pushed towards the exit, past frowning clerks and office ladies. An official called out a warning about public safety in subway stations. Subaru ignored it, racing up the escalator to the rhythm of =Please stand within the yellow-marked safety zone on the step. Don't lean over the handrails. Don't run—=. Subaru, squeezing past an overweight employee in shirt-sleeves, did just that. Run.

Hibiya Park and the sidewalk of the Uchibori-dori towards Kasumigaseki were full of people: employees and government officials using the midday hour for a stroll in the sun. Subaru pushed ruthlessly through them. Sweat was running down his back. His hands still burned from the initial flash, but it was becoming

difficult to follow the sensation without lowering his shields. The Metropolitan Police Department rose high in front of him on the other side of a broad street as he stopped, panting, searching, concentrating...

The marks were close, very close. To the left. But there was only a flower bed with azaleas, and a deserted parking lot beyond. The building to which it belonged— No, that was too far already. He gave up, held his breath against the fog and queried the marks. Something flashed in thin air over the empty concrete.

Seishiro was on the hunt. Nothing was as it seemed.

Subaru took an ofuda and a ballpoint pen from his pocket. The shikigami that obeyed the sign for clairvoyance was a stark white light, illuminating fog and illusion alike, revealing the truth underneath: the parking lot lying quietly in bright sunlight; Seishiro's blue sedan standing less than three paces away on the other side of the flower bed; blood spreading on the concrete, bright crimson in the harsh midday sun, glistening on the steel handle of the knife that nailed a black ofuda to Seishiro's back.

Deep red azaleas crushed under Subaru's boots as he forced his way through the flower bed into the illusion — an imperfect illusion of an empty parking lot smelling of blood, corpses, death, and rhododendron. He counted his steps, crouched, searched... found Seishiro, his shoulder, his back, the knife, the flutter of a heartbeat against his palm. Blood flowed over his hands as he raised him up. Seishiro's breath was a lessening whisper...

Subaru coughed. The fog was thickest here, seemed to pour out of Seishiro's wound into the world of the living. Whoever was clouding the spirit world had evoked the spell on Seishiro's back, fueling it with his blood. Why hadn't the Sakura ended this? Why hadn't Seishiro reached for—? Another violent coughing fit; this close, the fog was suffocating; and in the spirit world— Subaru froze.

In dark onmyojutsu you got what you saw, and if you saw nothing—

The accidental pentagram of CLAMP campus had hidden Seishiro even from the Kamui.

According to the paper, the 'Sakurazukamori' had already killed in Ueno, Minato, and Shinjuku. There had to be two more, with a mutilated spirit at each location, giving a pentagram the size of inner Tokyo, drawn with corpses in the world of the living and with torn spirits in the world of the dead.

A pentagram to cut the Sakura off from its guardian until his blood ran out.

He had to reach the Sakura before that happened, but the spirit fog blinded him as well, and the pentagram containing it was too large to be erased in time. Fog dissolved in the sun's warmth; Amaterasu's purifying flames would clear it in the spirit world. But in the center of a pentagram, his powers were blocked. Except—

If he looked towards Ueno, he was looking towards a tip, seeing a pentacle although the figure was intended as a pentagram. In white onmyojutsu a pentacle intended as a pentagram was a pentagram...

...but in dark onmyojutsu, intention didn't matter.

If he used dark onmyojutsu to call the Sun, then Amaterasu's power would enter the pentacle he was seeing, not the pentagram it was intended to be. But only one dark goddess carried the Sun within her. And calling his family kami with onmyojutsu as dark as that...

Subaru drew a deep breath. Resting Seishiro against him, he focused left-handed, with four fingers instead of one; fingers coated in blood that wasn't his own. Four was the number associated with death. Death was...  
*Kali.*

°°°Om Klim Kalika-yei Namaha°°°<sup>43</sup>

She was the goddess of death and truth — Seishiro was dying in his arms underneath the illusion.

°°°Om Klim Kalika-yei Namaha°°°

She was the ultimate reality — his hands were covered with blood.

°°°Om Klim Kalika-yei Namaha°°°

She carried the Sun in her right eye — Amaterasu's flames ignited the fog, covering the spirit world in ash flakes, raining like petals, becoming petals... Sakura petals gushed around them, shining white when washing over Subaru's cheeks, crimson red when touching the blood on his hands, palest pink when whispering over Seishiro.

Subaru almost choked in relief. "Help him," he said hoarsely, his fingers trailing blood over Seishiro's pale cheek. "He needs you."

...*He shouldn't need anyone...* the Tree answered.

"But that's not what *you* want, is it?" Subaru returned, tightening his hold.

...*True...* The Sakura's branches swished. A blossom-cushioned twig whispered around Subaru's neck, dipped into his collar. ...*Kali is an intoxicating perfume for the likes of you...* The Sakura had fully manifested now. ...*What makes you think I won't take you instead?...*

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43 °°°Aum Klim Kalika-yei Namaha°°° A mantra to Kali (or Kalika), which is said to bring relief or escape from difficult situations, but sometimes in drastic fashion. Kali is known as one of the fiercest aspects of Divinity; she destroys all negativity to make way for the positive. In Tantra her role is extended to be the "Ultimate Reality"

The concrete underneath was gone; Subaru was kneeling on earth wet from blood, but he didn't care. He still felt Seishiro's blood soaking his sweater. So much blood, too much blood. "Because you'd lose him."

A twig danced along his cheek. *...So wise now...* The fall of petals thickened; twigs and branches cushioned by thick pads of flowers reached for Seishiro, feeling for the pulse, for the injury. The dense crown shook while shoots curled around the knife, countless blossoms absorbed the blood. A twig supported Seishiro's head while branches wound around shoulders and thighs, taking him from Subaru. The Tree's magic pulsed against his shields in the rhythm of a pumping heart. Crimson sap beaded from soft green shoots between slightly parted lips as the Tree enclosed its guardian...

... while Subaru stood. Blood glued his sweater to his skin, had soaked into his pants, his underwear. He was cold. And angry. His right hand formed into a trembling fist and two sets of sigil scars — beneath blood and bark — flared to life. A twig curled sharply around his wrist.

*...Where are you going?...* the Sakura demanded to know.

"Making sure it won't happen again," Subaru said flatly.

The twig around his wrist tightened. The rough bark broke his skin, drawing blood that was greedily absorbed. *...He will be fine soon...*

"Good." Subaru pulled his wrist free. The parking lot rematerialized under him. Without Seishiro.

Subaru closed his coat over the blood as he walked towards the house.

The lobby wasn't more than two elevators framed by a staircase. The glass doors on the second floor held a company logo: a round, stylized sakura flower overlaid with five swords pointing at the tips of a pentagram. Subaru pushed through them, walking straight past the startled receptionist. She hurried after him, tried to block his path. He didn't even look at her when he tossed the ofuda binding her on the spot. The room at the end of the corridor was a large, airy office with a pretty view of the Sakuradamon and the Kokyo Gaien park on the other side of the street.

And of the parking lot marked with blood lying in the sun.

Seishiro's blood.

The office was empty; Subaru turned on his heel. The conference room was on the other side of the lobby; an odd part of him wondered how he knew. A red light above the door marked it sealed and in use. He closed his hand around the door knob. The lock clicked...

The room was dark except for the flicker of four monitors on the opposite wall. A tall man in a dark suit sat at a desk with his back to the door. A camera pointed at him. The screens showed similar desks in dimmed rooms in front of dark wooden doors like the one through which Subaru had just come, but the center of the desks was blurred, obscuring the people behind them.

"—most certainly dead by now. I am maintaining the illusion from afar while we speak. Kasumigaseki is sealed for—"

=Not for a Seal, Honshu-san,= the shadow on the screen labeled 'Shikoku' said. =Greetings, Sumeragi-san. It's certainly been—=

Seishiro's enemy whipped around, struck—

Subaru was faster. Five ofuda thrown; five shiki slammed against a hastily erected spirit shield, their points of impact marking a pentacle burning with Amaterasu's unfettered flames, hot enough to appear white. His opponent was thrown over his desk into the unblurred focus of the camera.

Subaru calmly closed the door under the silent watch of the four blurred figures on the screens. "I've come for the one responsible for the clouding of the spirit world. Is that you?"

A carrion crow manifested, dived, its black beak aiming for Subaru's eyes, only to shatter against a pentacle screen.

Subaru brushed a couple of singed paper scraps off his sleeve. "I'll take that as a 'yes'."

The answering blast was raw power, unaimed, unfocused, meant to blind him while it scattered off his spirit shield. Subaru barely dodged the dozen wind sickles that followed; one came close enough to cut strands of his hair and slash across the side of his throat. A few centimeters more and it would have cut his carotid. He touched two fingers to the slash. They came away wet and crimson; his blood over Seishiro's.

The crow's master was on his feet now, cold grey eyes trained on Subaru. "As you see, I don't indulge my predecessor's transgressions. I'd rather see you dead than in my bed." The sigils on Subaru's hands flared at his words. The room filled with an overwhelming scent of sakura and blood, rotting corpses and azalea.

"...Transgression isn't for you to define..." Subaru heard himself saying in a voice he barely recognized as his own. "...That right wasn't given to your position..."

"Who are y—?" A sudden whirl of petals wrought itself solidly around the crow master's throat, silencing him.

".../ am the one who defines transgression..." The voice was ancient, and filled with the same cold anger Subaru felt. ".../ am the one who judges..." The stream of petals began to abrade skin. "...Sei-chan is the one who insists on swift and neat kills. But you don't like his ways, do you, Romiro? You like to play..." Petals whirled, cutting deeper, turning blood red as they danced along twitching muscles that were no longer covered by skin. "... Just like me..."

A skinless hand, tendons visible as pale streaks in the red flesh, reached for Subaru. Intoxicating blood dripped on the expensive light grey carpet. A silent begging for mercy after throat and vocal cords were long gone. Subaru dug his nails into his palms. There was no mercy. There was only wrath, and the heady blood that evaporated from the writhing remains in front of his feet, tempting him to dance on them. It took all his strength not to take the first step, not to sway to the arousing music of torn breath and breaking bones. He didn't turn away until after the corpse had dissipated in a gust of petals.

The screens were still lit, the shadows behind their desks silent witnesses when Subaru left the room, allowing the corridor light to illuminate the stain where the blood of Seishiro's enemy had soaked into the carpet. He took the binding off the office lady when he crossed the lobby and headed down the stairs, out of the building.

Clouds had taken the sky outside as if fog and turmoil in the world of the dead had begun to spill over into the world of the living. Bloody footprints ran over the parking lot into the building. Seishiro's blood. Subaru's boots. Kali's heat.

Subaru's lips were dry; he licked them. The rising wind was cool on his tongue, smelling of ash and sex— He shivered. The blood was burning on his skin, speaking of promises better left unkept.

He couldn't get on a train like this — the closeness, *the bodies*... Instead he walked all the way to Ueno in blood-soaked clothes sticking to his skin. It began to rain when he reached the southern edge of the park. He was soaking wet when he touched the Sakura. Burning with fever. Burning with heat. He pressed himself to the rough bark, to the body underneath, to Seishiro...

Seishiro...

Kali wanted Seishiro. *He* wanted Seishiro. Ferociously. Now. Subaru moved against him, against the rough bark, relentless in his need, his demand. A tremor ran through the tall body. Blossoms the color of fresh blood cushioned the trunk. There was a low, aggressive growl; Subaru realized it was his own. He bit down, tasted blood, clawed into wet cloth, tore, tangled. Skin...

He undid the belt, pulled at the pants, reached for...

He wanted him, needed him, needed to sheathe himself in him.

He had no lubrication; he didn't care; he—

—pumped burning seed into the receiving body—

—was entered, spread—

—screamed, bled—

—and remained completely still for a couple of breaths before collapsing. He didn't mind the spilled seed between them or the rough bark of the branch between his thighs scraping his skin when it kept him from sliding to the ground. He felt heavy, sated... surreal with two hearts beating in synch in his chest, two breaths. Blood and sap. Seed and sakura. If this was illusion...

"Please, be real..." he whispered desperately, "be alive..."

Something cold touched his face, his waist.

Cushions of withering petals.

A hand ran in light caress through his hair. A hush of air touched his temple.

Someone whispered, "Shway hao, xiao zi."<sup>44</sup>

Then there was only the dark.

And the Sakura.

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44 "Shway hao, xiao zi" - literally: "Sleep well, little one." in Chinese.



## 16 — SumeraMori 2

*Kalika slowly subsided, as did the sun called with her power, allowing Tsukiyomi's pale light to return, silvery blue after his sister's red-hot flames. The rainstorm in the world of the living died down, leaving Ueno Park and the Sakura's worldly existence dripping with water, while its guardian and his counterpart slept between the Tree's roots, covered in blood and seed that glued the withering petals of both worlds to their skin.*

*They still personified the Dao; a disheveled Dao frayed by reality; a Dao truly belonging to both worlds now, sleeping in unconscious innocence on the border between...*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

Heartbeats filled his ears, the chest under his cheek rising and falling with breath. Warm. The blood was dried, the skin healed. He dreamed of arms around him, holding him, keeping him from doing even more harm than he already had. He...

Subaru blinked, confused, finding himself in their bed. Seishiro looked so pale against the black sheets. Subaru reached up, laid trembling fingers on to Seishiro's chest, resting his cheek on his hand, and with each breath he smelled blood and sakura and s—

He barely made it to the bathroom before he was violently sick, lying on hands and knees over the shower drain. Black, coagulated blood and yellow bile... When the spasms brought nothing but pain, he turned on the shower and flopped, exhausted, with his back against the tiled wall, remembering another shower, hours... days... earlier...

Semen on blood had come off his abraded skin in flakes under the constant stream of hot water. Dulled, he'd watched them circle the drain before disappearing forever. So much blood on both their bodies—

A sharp cold blade pressed against his throat. Very slowly, Subaru shifted his gaze; Yue stood in solid form at his side. The jian didn't so much as move with Subaru's own breathing. Water drops from the shower sprayed on its steel, scattering in tiny glittering fountains as they splashed off the central flame pattern. "We've got to talk, Second-source-of-the-Dao."

"Can we postpone it until my head stops feeling like it wants to explode?" Subaru asked. The spirit blade nipped his skin at the words. It didn't hurt more than the raw inside of his throat.

Ten minutes later he sat at the kitchen table, dressed haphazardly in slacks and a partially buttoned shirt, his shaking hands folded around a cup of coffee waiting for a double dose of acetaminophen to kick in. Even lukewarm the coffee wouldn't agree with his upset stomach, but its smell reminded him of normal breakfasts — breakfasts with Seishiro behind his morning paper on the other side of the table, not with a fourteen-hundred-year-old spirit hovering above the box with his case files next to it.

"Why are you here?" Subaru asked.

"Insurance." The voice with its Chinese accent was soft, flowing, befitting one who worshiped Benzaiten.

"I ought to exorcise you." Subaru sipped from his coffee and forced himself not to cringe when his stomach cramped.

"You might want to answer the door first," the past Sakurazukamori said dryly, looking out the kitchen window, one hand resting loosely on the hilt of his sword. "I doubt Sei-chan's wards make exceptions for the police."

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence

Ameru lit an incense stick, bowed deeply in front of Amaterasu at the center of this small home shrine, and clapped his hands thrice. He'd left Kyoto almost twenty years ago and hadn't lived by his name since then, but she still was his kami.

He placed the small, yellowed ofuda flat in front of his knees on the tatami.

"Shuku Do." Pale yellow light enveloped the paper — cheap paper, a receipt from his bookstore in Okinawa, but that was what made his spell possible in the first place: books for knowledge and curiosity, Okinawa for the species — the paper crumpled, shriveled, curled up — "Sho!"

A tiny lizard the color of yellowed washi looked up at him with large golden eyes.<sup>45</sup>

Ameru smiled and put his hand on the floor in front of it. "Come," he said and the house gecko scampered swiftly across his hand to hide inside his sleeve.

The gecko would be his eyes and ears in the main house from now on. Calling a predatory animal as his shikigami was sacrilegious, but the task required a swift opportunism that couldn't be instigated in more docile species. Not for the first time, Ameru wondered if the Sumeragi law restricting shikigami to non-predatory animals wasn't in fact about bloodshed but about docility — of the onmyoji.

He drew a deep breath; these thoughts were probably more sacrilegious than calling a six centimeter long gecko shikigami who'd prey on the spiders while spying on the elders.

Another sacrilegious thought; maybe he ought to start a tally sheet to keep track of them. He stood, smoothed his clothes, and gave a final, apologetic bow to Amaterasu. It was time to pay the twelfth head his respects.

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

He dreamed...

...of Subaru, claiming his mouth, his body, his...

...of a woman, black as the night, kissing him, riding him, licking his lips with a tongue of blood while ch'i flooded his core.

Seishiro woke, finding the bedroom dim and the house itself quiet. The slight pull on the marks told him that Subaru wasn't anywhere within its walls. He wearily rubbed the ball of his palm across his dry eyes and felt on the nightstand for his glasses. There were dreams he could do without. He sat, then pushed himself up. The floor was cold under his bare feet; the air fresh against his—

With a frown, he took his dressing gown out of the closet and tied it while padding into the kitchen for a drink. When had he come home anyw—?

He nearly walked into Yue, who blocked — entirely too substantial — the kitchen door.

"Begone," Seishiro growled, freeing his way to a bottle of water from the fridge.

He poured himself a glass and drank, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Damn, he felt like the morning after he and Nokoru had had that argument about lemons in Dry Martinis. Seishiro laid the cool glass against his forehead and considered getting some ice from the freezer. Beside him, Yue took form again. "Begone," Seishiro repeated and his obnoxious predecessor flickered out of existence...

...only to reappear at the kitchen door in a flutter of sakura petals.

Seishiro sighed. "I suppose I can't get rid of you just now, can I?"

Yue gave a shallow bow. "The Sakura insists."

"The Sakura needs an ax." Seishiro sipped from his water.

"That, too," Yue conceded with a laugh. "And rest, after healing you."

Seishiro nodded. So he'd been injured. A spirit healing explained a number of things, especially blackout and thirst. He emptied the remaining water. "I guess it wants an extra treat for that."

"Unnecessary. Your chief of operations proved to be an opulent meal."

"I see." Seishiro refilled his glass. "I assume he didn't walk into a bus." Yue remained silent. Seishiro drank again. "And you're here, because...?"

"You'll need me. It was a close call, closer than you know. If your 'Subaru-kun' hadn't enacted Kali's revitalization of Shiva—"<sup>46</sup>

Seishiro spluttered water onto his pants. "Fuck!"

"Exactly."

Twenty minutes and various dire warnings about his condition later, Seishiro closed the bedroom door and sat down at his desk. Propping his elbows on the writing pad, he rested his head in his hands. If Yue was right, then he wouldn't be able to stay awake for long. "*Three hours*," Yue had warned him. "*Four, if you push yourself*." Seishiro ground his teeth.

He had to have been very near death for his ch'i to be depleted that much. But why had the Tree healed him then? Why had the Sakura wasted its power on a fallen guardian? And Subaru... Kali... He shook his

45 <http://www.qnc.org.au/Papers/Gecko/Gecko.html>

46 Kali's revitalization of Shiva. Kali is Shakti, energy itself. Her spouse, Shiva, is an emblem of consciousness. According to the tantric phraseology "Only when Shiva is (sexually) united with Shakti has Shiva power to act. Otherwise he is a corpse (shava)." In short: Shiva without Shakti is Shava.

head. The last thing he remembered outside his *dream* was Romiro, squinting despite having the sun at his back. "You shouldn't have broken the rules, Sei-kun."

Three hours.

Romiro wouldn't have staged an outright attack on him without permission. Seishiro rubbed his aching temples. He needed information about the situation in the Mori. Reliable information. Now.

The receiver lay still on the table, beeping faintly. Frowning, he put it back and checked the list of missed calls. Four contacts yesterday. None today. Nokoru's number three times in quick succession, then about an hour later a cellphone number he didn't recognize. Michiko, given the time. He dismissed Nokoru's calls and pressed redial to the cellphone.

=Romiro declared you dead!= Michiko barked into the phone before he even got around to say anything. =And you didn't bother to call for twelve hours! What were you thinking!?"

"That I have to quote Mark Twain too often," Seishiro returned dryly. "Hello, Michiko."

There was a brief silence on the other end. =The connection's secure,= she said at last. =Just how exaggerated was the report of your death?="

"Not much," Seishiro admitted. "It doesn't matter."

More silence; then she drew a breath and said, =You don't have the slightest idea what's been happening here after yesterday's conference, do you?="

"Care to give me a summary?"

=I just sent you a videolog. See for yourself. And Seishiro...="

He cradled the receiver between his shoulder and ear and started his laptop. "Yes?"

=I received a report that the Metropolitan Police Department is investigating the suspected murder of Sakurazuka Seishiro. You might want to clear that up.="

"Too bad Romiro's dead." He entered the password and waited for the email to download and decrypt. "I doubt they'll stage a séance to arrest him."

=Hardly. They arrested Sumeragi instead.="

Seishiro barely caught the receiver before it hit the floor.

Twelve minutes later, Seishiro was staring at the last frame of the video, studying the expression on Subaru's face, the whirl of Sakura petals above the blood stain on the carpet in front of him. The implications were... staggering. Almost in a trance, he raised the receiver back to his ear. "Michiko, I need five days. Do whatever you have to do so I get them."

=What are you planning?="

"First? To get my new chief of operations out of custody."

=Your *chief of operations*? Does he know that?="

"Not yet." He hung up and closed the laptop. A glance at the bedside clock told him he'd been up for over an hour. He couldn't waste time. Tossing the dressing gown onto the bed, he took underwear, a grey suit and shirt out of the closet.

"You have less than two hours," Yue reminded him, hovering in the door. "Three at most."

"Then I have to be fast."

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence

Lady Sumeragi clapped her hands the final three times and bowed in front of Amaterasu's tablet, before she pushed her wheelchair back to return to her own room. She waited until the fusuma was closed safely behind her. Only then did she allow her back to slump even slightly.

Two of the shoji to the stone garden had been removed and the warm air of spring mingled with the scent of Jinko clinging to her clothes after the offering. Subaru-san's incense was always heavy on wood and earth notes. She'd worried about it, when was younger, but he'd always reached the meditative trance easily despite the lack of ethereal fragrances. However, now that she went to Subaru-san's rooms four times a day to perform the worship she knew her grandson neglected out of necessity, the heavy scents started to feel oppressing.

Maybe she should begin using her own incense instead of his.

In his continued state of impurity it was impossible for him to resume this duty any time soon. She sighed. Given his attitude, it was possible that he wouldn't resume it all. There was only so much filth the clan's reputation could endure. She'd spoken on the council in his favor. It was an honor for the clan that their 13th head was a source of the revitalized Dao. But the other council members couldn't ignore the identity of the Dao's other source, and Subaru-san's despicable involvement with it. She pressed her fingertips tightly into her palm. Should there be anything else...

A quiet scratch on the fusuma had her banish the thought. She straightened. "Yes?"  
The fusuma opened a little and Maki bowed at her. "Shiro-san is here for you, Sumeragi-dono."  
She sighed. Another stubborn child. "Allow him in and leave us alone, please."

~::~::~~

Kasumigaseki, Tokyo  
Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department  
Criminal Investigation Bureau — Homicide Division

The room was bleak, held in functional grey with narrow windows high up the wall and furniture bolted to the floor. There were cameras in the corners of the ceiling and a white plastic cup with water stood in front of him on the table; a spot of purity in a place soiled with crime and hatred. Subaru hadn't touched it; he fit the place not the cup. Yet his eyes remained fixed on the cup even when Kono-san and a second man entered the room.

"Sumeragi-san? My partner, detective Kobayashi," Kono introduced his colleague, who sat down to the side, just outside Subaru's field of vision, while Kono put a manila folder and another plastic cup on the table. Coffee had sloshed over its brim, staining the plastic. Subaru licked his lip. A stained cup. He could touch a stained cup. The coffee smelled good. Seishiro always had coffee for breakfast—

"I didn't expect to meet you under circumstances like these," Kono said, taking a seat on the chair opposite Subaru. He opened the folder. "You're here because we have a couple of questions regarding your visit to Central Government Office Complex 6-B yesterday."<sup>47</sup>

Subaru nodded.

Kono took up the card Subaru had given him in Ueno Park last Sunday. "I was surprised that you moved from upscale Shinjuku to an area as remote as Ueno-Sakuragi. Even moving in with someone." He studied the scribbled address. "Sakurazuka Seishiro," he read, watching Subaru attentively now. "Is he the same Sakurazuka Seishiro, who accompanied you in 1990?"

Subaru's mouth was dry. The plastic cup with water gleamed in forbidding white. He swallowed painfully. "Yes."

Kono exchanged a glance with his partner. "What kind of relationship do you have with him?"

"We're in the same business." His voice sounded hoarse even to Subaru's own ears.

"Were there any frictions between him and you?" Kono inquired.

...*"Payment?" Seishiro asked, laughing.*

*Subaru caught his wrist. "Don't forget my change."...*

He shook his head. "No, I—"

"Sumeragi-san," Kobayashi interrupted. "What's with the injury on your throat?"

Subaru's hand involuntarily reached up to cover the cut with his hand, felt scab under his fingers where...

...*the wind sickle cut him. "I'd rather see you dead than in my bed."*

...*That right wasn't given to your position..."*

*Blood rained to the floor from a body ground to death by sakura petals for Kali's pleasure. The black goddess raged in his veins, surmounting Amaterasu's fires.*

*Blood and corpses on the ground. He denied Kali her dance, denied her her worship.*

*Ashes in the spirit world. He couldn't deny her her mate... his mate... He caught Seishiro's mouth in a deep, hungry, demanding kiss. Biting down, drinking him in. Raindrops danced on his skin as he claimed... Kali claimed... Seishiro for the living. He tried to reach for Amaterasu, but there was only Kali in the corpse and the blood—*

"—identified as Sakurazuka Seishiro's." Kono took a couple of pictures from the folder, placing them on the table in front of Subaru. A series of grainy black-and-white screenshots showed Subaru going into the building opposite the MPD headquarters, his boots leaving dark prints on the pale steps. "Can you explain these?"

An A4 color photograph was laid on top. The same steps, the same footprints...

...in blood. So much blood. Subaru shivered. This morning, his nails had been lined with it, like they'd been after Kamui brought him back from Rainbow Bridge. He—

"—we've got to *talk*, Sumeragi-san!" He winced at the loud slap of Kobayashi's hand on the table top.

"That includes you. Talking. I'll ask you outright: did you kill Sakurazuka Seishiro?"

*Seishiro in his arms, chest pierced and blood spreading on the concrete, torn flesh sucking around his wrist at each laborious breath, each halting word...*

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<sup>47</sup> Central Government Office Complex 6-B. The building of Sakura Enterprises doesn't exist. However, the Ministry of Justice's red brick building is "Central Government Office Complex 6" and the highrises behind it are "Central Government Office Complex 6-A", hence... :)

"Yes," Subaru said.

"Detectives!" A uniformed police officer opened the interrogation room after a brief knock. "There's somebody for you at the information desk."

~::~::~~

The moment they entered the reception area, Kono knew that something was wrong with their case — and with Sumeragi; it was a good thing they'd left the uniformed officer with him in the interview room. Kobayashi next to him also missed a step. The man waiting at the front desk was tall, broad-shouldered, and familiar. He hadn't changed much in the last ten years, and even though their suspect was Japan's best onmyoji, this man was way too alive to be a ghost.

"Sakurazuka-san," Kono greeted him calmly.

"Detective." A nod acknowledged him; Kono noticed that Sakurazuka's glasses were just tinted enough to obscure his eyes. "I was informed about an ongoing investigation regarding my assassination," Sakurazuka continued. "I thought I should assure you that I am still quite alive."

"Can you identify yourself?" Sakurazuka provided an official passport in the dark green color denoting a public servant. "Do you still work as a veterinarian?" Kono asked casually as he took it.

"Not for the moment."

"What do you do—" Kono opened the passport and stopped. An NPSC stamp on the first page obscured the fields "Date of birth" and "Registered domicile". He closed the passport quickly and handed it back. "Thank you for your assistance."

"But what's with the blood that's been identified as yours?" Kobayashi asked. "Forensics calculated a lethal amount—"

"If it were a lethal amount, I wouldn't be here, would I?" Sakurazuka seemed genuinely amused as he pocketed his passport. "I trust that the investigation will be halted."

"Consider the case closed," Kono said gruffly. "May I ask what kind of relationship you have with Sumeragi-san, Sakurazuka-san?"

"I'm afraid I do not see how that concerns you."

"He confessed to killing you less than ten minutes ago," Kobayashi exploded. "We can't possibly ignore—"

"I'm the supposed victim, detective." Sakurazuka took off his glasses, studying Kobayashi with icy calm. "Since I am not dead, he is obviously mistaken."

~::~::~~

Leaving the MPD, Seishiro glanced at his watch and headed straight across the busy Sakurada-dori towards the parking lot where his car had stood since yesterday. It had taken too long to get Subaru out of custody. At least the Aristo hadn't been towed.

Yellow paint next to it marked the spot where his blood had been spilled. More paint marks indicated footprints running from his car towards the house. He sighed and opened the driver's door. Subaru would have to work on his subtlety. Even now he was looking, transfixed, at the paint, then back towards the MPD. Work a lot.

"Stop acting guilty," Seishiro scolded impatiently. "And get in the car. We're still within sight." He started the engine and waited for Subaru to fasten his seatbelt, before he turned and drove down Sakurada-dori. A plain beige Mitsubishi Lancer left the MPD garage as they passed and went into the lane a few cars behind them. "We'll have to take a room. I won't last all the way back to Sakuragi now."

"Here?" Subaru asked, doubtful.

Seishiro didn't answer. Two turns later, he was sure the beige compact was following them; apparently, the detectives had split up for the observation before they checked his identity. Too bad. For them. He switched lanes again and pulled into the drive-in garage of his destination. Stopping in one of the first screened lots, he turned off the engine. A sign on the white-washed wall in front of them read:

| H~W~H~  
| Hotel White House — Discreet Lodging for Couples~  
| Starting Prices — Rest: 20.000 yen — Stay: 65.000 yen~  
| Special amenities inclusive — identity protection guaranteed~  
| All currencies accepted~<sup>48</sup>

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48 The "White House" is entirely fictitious. I have no knowledge of a love hotel within Kasumigaseki or Nagata-cho. Esp. given that Japanese love hotels normally don't admit same-sex couples for fear of voyeurism.

"You aren't serious, are you?" Subaru shook his head.

"Dead serious, pardon the pun." Seishiro got out of the car and headed for the lifts. Subaru followed him with a sigh. "Feel honored. This is the only establishment of its kind in Nagata-cho. Who do you think *comes* here?" A brief glance through the already closed doors confirmed that the beige compact didn't follow them. Seishiro smirked. Public services budgets did have their limits. "The theme rooms feature presidential offices around the world." He studied the board of lit room photographs and price tags next to the lift and shook his head. "I don't know why the 'Oval Office' is always taken; the desk looks decidedly uncomfortable." He chose a room decorated in dark colors and placed a bundle of ten thousand yen notes in the pay machine, sufficient for at least eight hours. An electronic keycard was returned and the lift moved up.

Room 4-17 could have been a suite in any well-situated business hotel in Tokyo, except for a couple of vending machines and an alcove holding a karaoke set — a feature Subaru studied with an expression of dread. The door sealed behind them and Seishiro checked the lock routinely. Normally, he'd put his own seal on the door — just in case — but he knew better than to risk spells so soon after a healing. That was a lesson he'd learned after Kobe's port authority and customs control had somehow missed a fully-fledged Demonar on an LNG carrier. Kobe—

Damn, he was losing focus. He didn't have much time left. Seishiro tossed his jacket over a chair, got himself iced water from the minibar and sat down on the left side of the bed. His fingers were already going numb when he undid the buttons at his cuffs and collar a few sips later. After removing his belt, he gave in to his exhaustion, lay down and closed his eyes.

Already half out, he felt the mattress move and Subaru tugging at his shirt, clumsily opening the buttons in the dark. Seishiro tensed, but only cool, trembling hands slipped onto his skin. Subaru curled up beside him, resting his cheek on his chest.

*...the surrounding darkness slowly gave way to a faint, dark-red glow above and around him. Rough bark pressed into his skin. The glow grew stronger, the maroon of old blood becoming the crimson of fresh blood and the pink of blood absorbed in petals...*

*Seishiro jumped to the ground. Keeping a hand firmly on the trunk, he squinted into the endless nothing beyond. Squinted... Since when did he need glasses in the spirit world?*

*A petal fluttered down his cheek. An ethereal touch... A breath touching behind his ear...*

*His mother said, "There is nothing more wonderful than being killed by the one you love."*

*"You don't understand." Subaru caught his arm, turned him away from her. "Why aren't you dead?"*

*"There can't be anyone I love," he heard himself saying.*

*"I think you're making a mistake," Nokoru said behind his left shoulder.*

*"This isn't one of your games!" Subaru pushed him back against the black wood of the trunk, pressing in on him. "I want to see you and not an illusion of you!"*

*"You have nothing to fear from death." His mother's fingers danced down his side, dipping between his legs. "You have nothing precious. Nothing you would regret losing."*

*...are you sure?... the Sakura rustled above him.*

Sweat-soaked, Seishiro sat up straight; the cover pooled in his lap. Subaru, still sleeping beside him, murmured something against his side.

~::~::~~

Sakura Enterprises, Osaka

April 14, 2000 — 16:58

Fujiwara Michiko, chief of operations of the Osaka office, sealed the conference room and waited while her peregrine circled the room twice, to settle comfortably on her shoulder. Satisfied, she released the shikigami with a nod and sat down behind the front desk. This was going to be an interesting session.

She activated the connection and waited for the strongly scrambled video conference with its blurred participants to establish. Kyushu and Korea had already arrived. Hokkaido was late, as always. They all knew that Honshu wouldn't come.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said firmly. "Allow me to begin with an announcement. Contrary to the former Honshu-san's statement, the position of the Sakurazukamori is not vacant—"

There were a couple of sharp intakes and Hokkaido-san cleared his throat.

"—and has not been vacant at any time in the last twenty years."

A muttered =Good.= came from the screen labeled "Korea"; "Hokkaido" and "Kyushu" said nothing.

"Sakurazuka contacted me this morning, confirming his continuing service and reminding us that he will decide about the Honshu division within the week, *according to protocol.*"

=Now, that would be a first!= Kyushu snorted. =Hear my words: We're going to need completely new staff for Honshu, once he's done! =

*Bet on it, Michiko thought grimly. And you're lucky if it's only Honshu.*

~::~::~~

Nagata-cho, Tokyo  
Hotel White House — Room 4-17  
20:17

Subaru woke in a nest of twisted sheets. The shower was running next door. A used food tray stood on the floor next to the service lift. It looked like Seishiro had been up for a while.

Freeing his legs, Subaru sat up and set his feet to the floor. The sound of water stopped; a few moments later, Seishiro came out of the bathroom. His movements were normal, forceful as usual. A narrow line of silvery skin on his back, less than the width of two fingers long, was all that remained of the injury and—

Subaru locked his eyes firmly down on his own hands. He was still feeling Seishiro beneath him, was hearing the wet sounds of blood and crushed petals between them as he drove into him again and again, drunken from the cold flesh touching his own. He'd bitten down, hard, grinding his teeth around Seishiro's collarbone when the Sakura took him, sharp, painful thrusts forcing him to continue until Seishiro convulsed around him and golden eyes flew open, wide with pain—

Subaru clasped his knees until his knuckles stood out white and wished that Seishiro's suit would come back from ironing. The Sakura had healed more than the stab wound. Much more. And Seishiro, in nothing but black briefs and socks, seemed oblivious of that. Subaru closed his eyes. If he—

The service lift pinged. Seishiro retrieved his suit. The bite on his shoulder was gone. Subaru shuddered and wrapped his arms around himself.

"What's wrong?"

Subaru couldn't tell him. It wasn't Kali who had chosen her mate. Kali who'd— "I... You have to..." he heard himself whisper. "Keep me from hurting you."

Seishiro, pulling up his pants, snorted. "As if you could."

"I couldn't... *stop*. And I wanted, I *tried*, I—"

"You called Kali. What did you expect?" Seishiro asked wryly. "The heart of creation is chaos. It's gates are death and sex. And the Vamachara is a shortcut through both." He shrugged into his shirt, the silk of the unbuttoned fabric fluttering around him. Grey and silver... like Yue... A ghost to be banished, to be exorcised for meddling with the affairs of the living. But Subaru had felt his heartbeat this morning with hands tarnished with blood and death. He stood. He couldn't continue like this. He—

"Excuse me," he said and went into the bathroom.

The room was large, with black marble and mirrors still fogged from Seishiro's long shower. Subaru wiped his right sleeve across the mirror above the sink and studied his face, expecting... he didn't know what. A good onmyoji was able to sense his own aura, but only the aura of other people could be seen. Others would have to judge the stains on him now.

Blood and death. The burakumin had been ostracized for that. He ran his hand across his face. Onmyoji as diviners had shared their fate as hisabetsumin in the early days; but they'd remained pure and with his family's ties to Amaterasu...<sup>49</sup>

He shivered. Blood and ash. Sap, semen, death...

He stared at his hands, white and smooth from years under gloves. He turned the cold water on full and scrubbed them. The washcloth was too soft. The brush was better. He pushed his sleeves up over his elbows, scrubbed up his arms...

His wrists were caught. The brush cluttered down into the sink when Seishiro pulled him back, trapped him behind his own crossed arms, a solid form against Subaru's rigid back. "If you wash your hands any more, there'll be nothing left of your skin."

"I need to cleanse myself!" There was a sob. Was that him? "I— I've killed. The blood—"

"You were the vessel, not the weapon," came Seishiro's voice. "Kali did the rest."

"I— He sagged against Seishiro, into his arms, his damning hold on him. "I vowed to kill you. I wanted to be killed by you." He turned, buried his face against Seishiro's throat. "Now I killed *for* you..."

---

49 Burakumin and hisabetsumin. Hisabetsumin is a collective term for people ostracized from the general populace in Heian times because they were seen as being defiled, polluted (*kegare*) mostly due to their work, which brought them in contact with blood, death, or the otherworld. Among the ostracized professions were artisans, prostitutes, diviners (including onmyoji!), undertakers, butchers, etc. Discrimination against the Burakumin (contemporary descendants of and dwellers of former Hisabetsumin communities) was formally ended in 1871, but it is still a contemporary problem.

"Wrong." Seishiro shoved him back. "You allowed the Tree to kill for me." There were stains on Seishiro's sleeves where the soap from Subaru's arms had soaked into them. Subaru stared at them... at Seishiro.

The Tree... Kali... *he...*

Was Seishiro stained because of him? Did he— He closed a shaking hand over one of the stains on Seishiro's sleeve. "Yesterday... did I hurt you?"

Seishiro freed his arm with a sharp jerk.

Subaru caught him. "Please. I need—" He reached up, tiptoed, crossed his wrists loosely in Seishiro's nape and claimed his lips, open-mouthed, startling himself at the hunger in it.

His hunger. Not Kali's.

Closing his eyes, he dug his fingers into Seishiro's hair, pulling Seishiro against him. "You aren't dead," he whispered, fiercely, into the kiss. "You aren't." He felt the tension, expected the final strike to come any moment with an arm through his chest and... around his back, supporting him, holding him. Seishiro. All he felt was Seishiro. Seishiro and—

Over Seishiro's shoulder, he saw himself, his bare, red-scraped arms still lying around Seishiro's neck. The steam had cleared from the mirror showing Subaru Seishiro's tousled hair and his own rumpled clothes. He averted his eyes.

*Don't look. Don't see. Pretend you didn't do what you just did,* Hokuto's exuberant voice sang in his ears. *And. Do. It.* He remembered her laughing at the last line, while the hand that had killed her caressed his back.

"You've got unexpected talents, Subaru-kun." Seishiro's quip sounded strangely breathless.

Chuo-ku, Tokyo

Shuto Expressway 1 — Ueno Route

twenty minutes later

The traffic was thick, moving slowly, if at all. The question — when it finally came — was deceptively casual. "Who taught you that?"

Subaru didn't have to ask what 'that' meant. "Hokuto-chan. Don't you recall that day on Tokyo Tower?"

"I remember you considering it perverted."

"I still do," Subaru said quietly, avoiding Seishiro's eyes in the rearview mirror as the traffic stopped them once again. "I just stopped caring about it."

Somebody honked. Seishiro returned his attention to the traffic. "We have to sort out the mess Romiro made to build his trap," he said several minutes later.

"I know." Subaru sighed. "Four mutilated spirits and—"

"You're not going anywhere near those sites." Seishiro gave him a stern look. "Policemen have a good memory, Subaru-kun. You were the suspect in a homicide case; they won't forget that fact any time soon."

"Homicide case? You're here and alive!"

"It was one when you were interviewed." Seishiro snorted. "So you will stay out of it. Aren't there any onmyoji within your clan who can take those tasks?"

Subaru sighed. "Omi might be strong enough and he's within reach."

"Good. Call him when we get home." Seishiro changed lanes. "And make sure he brings some time. Somebody has to do your work while we sort out your family affairs." He turned on the indicator to take the Ueno exit. "And mine."

They left the car in the reserved parking lot at Ueno Station and crossed through the park on the way to Sakuragi. Subaru insisted on giving the Sakura an extra wide berth. Seishiro didn't seem to mind. They walked in silence. Eyes seemed to rest on them from the dark; Subaru thought of the dead soldiers guarding Ueno and the Sakura in the spirit world. He'd gained their respect. And probably lost it yesterday. He didn't know.

He was crossing the park at the side of the Sakurazukamori. Subaru shivered. In this and the other world, they were truly each other's reflection.

What he was for the world of the living, Seishiro was for the world of the dead. The guardian. The protector... against perpetrators from the other side. They guarded the same border, the same untouchable surface...

For a brief moment, a breeze moved the branches above their heads. The light of an almost full moon broke through the foliage, passing over rows of spirit soldiers shielding their path on either side before the spiritual darkness of mere electric lighting returned.

When they finally got home, the single street lamp in front of their house was flickering in a halo of hapless insects. Seishiro unlocked the garden gate and made sure that it closed quietly behind them.



Inside the house, he kicked off his shoes and headed straight up the stairs to the kitchen. "Supper! I'm starving."

Subaru followed him more slowly. The box with his case files still stood on the floor next to the table; he ignored it. He pulled out a chair and sat down, propping his elbows on the place mat. "What did you mean by 'sorting out our family affairs'?"

Seishiro sniffed at the content of an orange tupperna box and put it in the microwave, then he leaned against the counter and studied Subaru calmly. "I was surprised to learn that you helped rid the world of my chief of operations," he said finally and leisurely crossed his ankles. In his slightly crumpled dress pants and shirt, he was a grey shadow against the lime green of his kitchen. "I expect to see you at the office on Monday."

"What office?" Subaru looked at him, uncomprehending.

"Romiro's."

Subaru laughed. "Are you insane?"

"You are the living entity involved in removing him from office," Seishiro explained calmly. "A classic succession by Mori standards."

*A classic suc—* Subaru froze. Seishiro couldn't possibly suggest that— He sat back. "You're serious."

"Yes." Seishiro crossed his arms. "So, I'm short a chief of operations. Interested?"

"No. I'd be crazy to work for you."

"Not 'for'. *With*. You'd be working *with* me." Seishiro sighed. "Think about it. It's what we did in the last four months."

"Not like that!" Subaru protested. "And unofficially. Without anyone knowing. Did you forget who I am? Your people would never—"

"You offed him in front of four out of five section leaders." Subaru winced, but Seishiro didn't pay attention to that. "They either accept you or they have to abolish their rules." The microwave beeped and he retrieved the rice and brought it to the table, making a pointedly large step across Subaru's case files. "Look on the bright side. At least, you'll get an office with a desk and a file cabinet of your own." He went to fetch dishes and chopsticks.

"And I'd be working for... with... my clan's greatest enemy on business my clan considers beyond contempt," Subaru snapped. "I'm on the verge of being expelled because you are the other source of the Dao. Do you have any idea what they'd do to me for this?"

"Can't be worse than what mine already did." Seishiro rummaged in one of the hanging cabinets. "But I concede that the idea might be a bit taxing to their ethical system." He returned to the table with two glass dishes. "We better get them in hand first."

"Get in hand? They won't even listen to me!"

"Then we'll make them." Seishiro unfolded his napkin with a sharp flap and placed it in his lap. He reached for his chopsticks. "Itadakimasu."

Subaru didn't feel like eating.

*In Ueno, the Tree dug additional roots deep into the ground, sucking up blood that colored its blossoms a dark crimson in the pale light of the waxing moon. The raging of Romiro's infuriated spirit tickled in its veins.*

*Full moon would be in five nights.*

*Idly, the Sakura wondered if all of Seishiro's Mori would be as tasty as Ro-chan.*

## 17 — Solar Eclipse

*Tendrils of power, delicately woven, rewoven, strengthened, spread from Ueno Park to Sakuragi and the Yanaka cemetery beyond. Still blood-colored blossoms quivered in the spirit wind. The wards around Seishiro's house were as strong as ever. The wards around the basement holding Yue's first enemy captive were even stronger; a burning sphere within the spirit world, containing someone who, in life, had burned even hotter. Hot enough to cauterize branches. His assault had left one of very few scars the Tree hadn't been able to heal over more than a millennium.*

*Foreign symbols were engraved in the walls holding him these days; symbols of ice unaffected by the heat. The Sakura was fascinated by them, fascinated — and disquieted.*

*Runes, as Sei-chan had called them, were immediate. They were paid for when invoked, with blood and pain, courage and determination. There was no sakanagi afterwards, but consummation in case of failure.*

*An intriguing concept that excluded Yue and the Emperor's Murderer equally, because they both lacked the physical body with which to invoke the runes. And the Sakura, being physically a plant...*

*It brushed a spirit blossom along the cold outline of a rune. Hoar frost covered the delicate petals, while the spirit inside roared in fury. But the rune didn't react, as if the ancient power of over 2600 years didn't exist for it.*

Nozomi Shinkansen to Kyoto, departure Tokyo Station, 18:10  
April 15, 2000

The green class car was crowded with businessmen searching for their reserved seats. A railway attendant helped an older woman with her luggage. Somebody was booting a laptop a few rows away from them.

Subaru hung their coats on the hooks next to the window before sitting down. Beside him, Seishiro retrieved his paperback novel and lifted their trolley into the small luggage compartment overhead. A melodious voice told them about their departure in two minutes and the arrival times at the following stations. Subaru pulled Seishiro's coat over the edge of his headrest and nestled his cheek into the smooth cloth, watching the platform outside.

A woman with two children was waiting for the train to depart. The younger girl seemed to be close to tears; the older tried to appear unaffected. Subaru looked along the gap between the windows and the seats in front of him and saw a man's hand — white cuff, black jacket sleeve, gold cufflink with a company logo — pressed against the glass.

The station speakers, dulled inside, announced their impending departure. The girls waved when the train began to move. In two and a half hours they'd be in Kyoto. A little more than three hours and they'd be at the main estate. By then Seishiro would be pushing his limits.

Beside Subaru, with his seat comfortably inclined, Seishiro was reading already. Aggressive red and white letters spilled the title over the upper half of his paperback: *Battle Royale* by Koushun Takami. The book had stirred up considerable excitement among highschoolers. Was Seishiro reading for entertainment or...?

Subaru turned away, looked at the houses rushing past the window outside.

"We should offer joint services," Seishiro had joked when Subaru had sat droopy-eyed at breakfast today, after a sleepless night spent preparing case files for Omi. "They have the problem; we decide on the remedy."

Subaru rested his chin in his hand. It would be a heavy burden for his people. If the Sumeragi failed, the Sakurazukamori provided a "terminal solution". Right now, when a case was wrongly assigned, they could back down, pretending not to know what happened next.

*Are you less of a murderer because you preferred to be ignorant of my likely intentions?* the Sakura had asked him in the old reality. *Are you less of a murderer because you are Sumeragi?*

Prefer to be ignorant...

Pretend not to know...

Subaru exhaled sharply and leaned back in his seat. His family was skilled in pretending, but pretense was no longer an option for himself. Something in him had answered to Kali, had fiercely embraced what was his — hers? — and wouldn't let go even after the goddess had faded. Something that didn't care for pretense. Or propriety, for that matter. Or chastity. He glanced sideways at Seishiro who had dozed off over his novel, the open book lying on his chest. The silk lining of his unbuttoned suit jacket had the same crimson color as the letters of the book title.

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
21:12

The stone lanterns lining the driveway were lit when the car turned onto the estate, their electric lights rushing past and finally mingling with the soft glow coming from the shoji of the house. The fire bowls left and right of the stairs to the engawa, warding against evil and misfortune, flickered as they got out of the car. Leaving Hamamatsu to deal with the luggage, they headed up the stairs. Subaru hadn't given him a chance to call home after collecting them at Kyoto station, but going by the preparations, his grandmother had expected him not to come alone. The door opened when they reached the topmost step and the head servant bowed to him. "Be welcome in your house, Sumeragi-sama." She threw a nervous glance at Seishiro and added, "and also your guest."

"Thank you, Rumiko-san. It's good to be here again." Formal words. Empty lines. Subaru felt them echoing in the void. He did not say 'tadaima'.

"I will be under your honorable care from now on," Seishiro said quietly behind him and his ironical smile when Subaru looked over his shoulder turned the set phrase into something else entirely.

"Your grandmother is awaiting you." Rumiko bowed again.

"Please see our luggage to my room and prepare the futons. It's been a long day." Subaru turned his attention to Seishiro. "Please wait while I pay my respects. I won't take long."

"Take your time." Seishiro shrugged, watching Hamamatsu come through the door with the trolley.

The dark-framed fusuma of the tea room were pushed back soundlessly as Subaru approached. His grandmother acknowledged him with a quiet nod. She wore her dark blue kimono embroidered with protective star constellations. The kimono itself was a piece of art and power, made by his great-great-grandmother in the last days of the Shogunate. His grandmother was reminding him of the traditions he had failed to uphold and the threat of the guest he had brought into her home.

He bowed, and she indicated the tea set standing prepared at her side and the sitting cushion laid out for him before her. The shoji to the garden were closed. It was years since they had been open during one of his visits. He sat down quietly, resting his crossed hands on his knees, while she stirred the green tea into a bitter foam.

It was late. He'd gone with too little sleep in the nights before, and he wished that she'd just say what she had to say and be done with it. But that wasn't his grandmother's style and so he waited, trying not to fret about having left Seishiro in the hall, not to think about the blood on his own hands. Finally, his grandmother laid the tea brush aside and offered the bowl. Subaru accepted it gracefully from her hands, turned it properly and took the ritual sip, no more than a wetting of lips.

"Your resolve not to bring the enemy into our house didn't last long, Subaru-san."

He put the tea bowl down, not intending to touch it again. "The events during the past eight days forced me to reconsider my decision. I have to address the elder council immediately."

"I assume the matter is related to the police inquiry about you that arrived this morning?"

"That was a misunderstanding. The investigation has been stopped already and the case is closed."

"I am aware of that," his grandmother said frostily. "The fax revoking the inquiry actually arrived beforehand. However, the fact remains that you *were* the suspect in a heinous crime and that the police found it advisable to inquire about your personal conduct, specifically about your relationship with one Sakurazuka Seishiro, leading me to believe that he is actually the one behind the crime of which you were accused." She studied him sternly. When he said nothing, she prompted, "Was it that way, Subaru-san? Are you shielding him from the law?"

"No," he said firmly.

"So the Sakurazukamori wasn't involved in the crime?" she pressed.

Subaru swallowed. "Not as perpetra—" A flash of power surged through the wards spanning the estate. His grandmother made a protective sign. The scars on Subaru's hands flashed briefly. A query. Weak. "No!" He leaped to his feet.

The front hall thrummed with tension when Subaru arrived. The dark-red suit trolley was still there with Hamamatsu behind it, pointing his service weapon—

—straight at Seishiro, who was returning the favor.

"What's going on here?" Subaru asked sharply, directed at Seishiro.

"He used an ofuda against me!" Hamamatsu snapped instead.

"Would I have to point a gun at you if I had?" Seishiro asked him smugly.

"To obscure your intention?" Hamamatsu sneered. "Of course!"

"More precisely, Subaru-kun—" Seishiro's weapon didn't move at his words. "Would *he* be pointing a gun at me if I had?"

"Look at it!" Hamamatsu told Subaru. "The ofuda's still there!" He indicated a yellowed slip of paper on the floor between Seishiro and himself.

Subaru picked it up and turned it around. "This is a shopping receipt!" He flapped it against his palm. "Down with the weapons. Both of you!" With a sharp glare at Seishiro, who hadn't moved, he added, "*Please*." Seishiro lowered the gun. Subaru released a sigh of relief. "Hamamatsu-kun, refrain from pointing weapons at my guests. Somebody might get hurt."

"You, to be exact," Seishiro added calmly, while returning his weapon to the concealed holster under his left arm.

"Subaru-san?" Grandmother's stern inquiry was underlain with the faint creaks of the wheelchair coming closer. "What's going on here?"

"Just a misunderstanding," Subaru replied and — in passing — pressed the receipt into Seishiro's palm. "Vanish it," he hissed. Aloud, he explained, "Hamamatsu-kun overreacted."

"Recently, there are a lot misunderstandings around you, Subaru-san."

"I am aware of that, grandmother." Subaru shot a warning glare at Seishiro, who leaned against the wall, seemingly relaxed. *Leaned*. "Why wasn't our luggage brought to my room?"

"Your guest wasn't expected, Subaru-san," his grandmother reminded him. "One of the guest rooms is being prepared as we speak."

"No," Subaru said curtly. "Have a second futon put next to mine."

She stared at him, shocked. "Subaru-san! You can't possibly let an enemy of the house sleep in front of the kamidana! The west wing—"

"He sleeps with me," Subaru stated coldly. "Do you want to banish *me* to the west wing?"

Subaru didn't turn on the lights when the fusuma finally closed behind them. More than a dozen reverence lights had been lit in front of the kamidana, as if the sacred kami tablets were to be shielded from the impurity of their visitor... or the returned head of their house. The flames flickered. In the unsteady light Seishiro finally discarded his jacket, hanging it over the back of the single dark wood chair that stood in a corner of the room. His fingertips slipped off the shirt buttons repeatedly. Subaru saw him closing his eyes, focusing before continuing down the button row. Each button took more time, more attempts. Subaru went over to him. The dancing reverence lights would protect their shadows on the shoji from being read by the countless eyes doubtlessly turned to the room.

"Allow me to help," he said in a low voice, reaching for the remaining buttons. "Please." No protest. He cautiously unclipped the holster from Seishiro's belt and laid it onto the chair with the jacket. "I'd like it if you stopped wearing weapons in my house. It's disquieting."

Seishiro snorted. "I carry a gun in my own office."

"As if you needed it." Subaru sighed. "What kind of spell was on that receipt?"

"An observer shiki. Your driver overreacted." Seishiro rested his head against Subaru's temple. "Don't allow them to order you around," he said quietly, his breath moving Subaru's hair. "You are the head of your house. You don't go to them, you receive them. If you give them superiority in detail, they gain superiority in the whole. You can't afford that."

"I know, but my grandmother is upset. The police inquired about me."

"That's nothing. The case is closed."

"They inquired. That means I'm no longer above suspicion."

"Above suspicion. Beyond all blame." Seishiro chuckled. "Nobody's above the law, doesn't she know that?"

"She's Sumeragi," Subaru said dryly, working on the last button.

"Of course. Forget I asked."

~::~::~~

April 16, 2000

Seishiro woke suddenly. Footsteps neared on the engawa, slowed, halted. For a moment, a dark shadow loomed against the light from the fire bowl outside; then the guard continued his round. Seishiro relaxed slowly. He felt the disquiet of the Sakura in the distance. The Tree had restored him from certain death, in spite of a ready successor at hand, and it didn't want him to put himself at risk until he was fit again. It had used Subaru to get to Romiro, and sent Yue, of all his predecessors, as a guardian into his house while it recovered from the task. It didn't make sense.

Nothing made sense.

He shivered and lay back down, trying to get comfortable despite the dozen reverence lights spreading the scent of oppressive incense and the various fires outside. Given the number of open flames in and around the old house through the night, he was surprised that the whole estate hadn't burned to the ground centuries ago.

Probably it had burned — and been rebuilt. Multiple times. It was the kind of stubbornness he'd come to expect from the Sumeragi. In their eyes, having the place burn down around your ears was an acceptable price for being safe from spiritual stain. He sneezed. As was being bothered by incense.

The sound of constricted breaths came from Subaru's shadowed form, followed by a faint wheeze. Frowning, Seishiro sat up again. "What's—?"

"*No! Akiko*—" Subaru jerked awake. In the dim light Seishiro saw him pressing his face against his knees, hugging his legs, shaking. "I'm sorry..." His ragged breaths were loud in the darkness. Sweat gleamed on his skin. "I didn't mean to—" He coughed and looked up. His eyes were too wide in the dark. Too wide, and frightened.

Seishiro stood, made a step across Subaru's futon, freed himself with a sharp twist from the hand clutching his pajama leg and pushed the shoji to the engawa wide open. Cold night air, traced with smoke from the fire bowls, flooded the room. A startled girl, probably five or six years old, stared at him from her place next to the fire. Maybe the place hadn't burned down as often as he thought. The reverence lights flickered low in the continuous draft from the night wind, driving the stifling scents of shikimi and patchouli away, as he returned into the darkened room.<sup>50</sup>

Subaru shivered in the cold air, but his erratic breathing had calmed. Seishiro watched him quietly. Better, he decided. Amaterasu's spirit tablet glowed in white sakura wood emblazoned with gold on the kamidana beside him. He considered it — *Her* — and extinguished the lights. Much better.

"How dare you—" Subaru started to rise.

Seishiro caught his wrist, pulled him back down. "Have the oil replaced with something unscented tomorrow. Shikimi doesn't agree with you."

"But I—"

"Shikimi doesn't agree with me, either," Seishiro told him coldly. "And I don't intend to put up with it." Or with that 'Akiko' occupying his prey's dreams, but that could wait until tomorrow, when he'd got rid of the one spying on him with an insufficiently-screened gecko shikigami. He pulled the cover over his ears against the cold draft from the open shoji.

~::~::~~

The first gong echoed through the house. Three sharp, high beats announcing Amaterasu's impending arrival gave her disciples thirty minutes to rise, cleanse themselves, light new reverence lights and bow their respects before taking their positions in the morning ceremony.

The room was cold. Beside him, Seishiro, completely hidden under the cover, mumbled something about 'god-forsaken time' and slept on. But then, Amaterasu wasn't his kami. Subaru frowned. Who was Seishiro's kami? Did he worship at all? For the first time, he realized that there was no kamidana, no place of worship in Seishiro's house. He'd never seen him in prayer, never saw him lighting a warding fire or offering incense—

"*Shikimi doesn't agree with you.*" As if fragrance mattered in worship.

Subaru wondered if the faint throbbing behind his temples was really because of the unusual shikimi in the incense or because of everything else. He looked at Seishiro, who seemed to be sound asleep again, and silently prayed that he hadn't called out when he had woken up in the night. The situation was bad enough as it was, without him having to defend his fiancée against his lov—

He startled at the word.

*You of all people should know that I'm capable of betrayal.*

But wasn't Subaru the one who betrayed... everyone? It was one thing when the head of a house didn't lie with his wife, didn't produce the required heir, thus failing in filial piety; it was another for him to lie in the arms of the enemy, seeking lust, pleasure... love?... while failing in filial piety. And having proclaimed it openly to the former clan head, who sat on the elder council, wouldn't make the upcoming confrontation with the elders easier. With Akiko he had failed, was still failing, in his duty; with Seishiro he was voluntarily committing far worse.

And yet...

The second gong, a reminder for laggards, reverberated painfully in Subaru's head. The fire bowl outside had burned low already. The child watching it overnight had left her post; she would have hurried to clean

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50 Shikimi is the Japanese star anise (*Illicium anisatum*). It is highly toxic, but still burned as incense in Japan. It is said to connect with the ether (or central void, depending on view), whereas patchouli as an incense ingredient relates to the element air.

herself and sit in the last row to welcome Amaterasu. He had to leave now or he'd be late for the ceremony — another grave offense after allowing her reverence lights to be extinguished last night.

It might well be the last time he'd be welcome at the daily ceremony. Perhaps the last time he'd be welcome here at all. He'd been suspected of murder, and he had called Amaterasu's pure light into the soiled chaos of Kali to save the one man his clan considered better left dead.

~::~::~~

#### Sumeragi Family Residence — West Wing

The unmarked door led to a corridor with plain, white-washed walls and a grey-streaked linoleum floor. Post-war decor, Seishiro decided. Probably with a slight do-over in the fifties, but not much afterwards. Doors went off the corridor left and right. Fuda with generic protection spells hung on each one, moving in the draft from the open house door. He stepped inside quickly and closed it behind him. A large spider plant in a wooden pot stood under a window at the other end. The leather soles of his shoes made no sound as he slowly proceeded deeper into the house, following the faint personal signature he'd isolated from the shopping receipt Subaru had given back to him yesterday.

Who besides the Mori would call a gecko shiki into the Sumeragi household? The tiny lizard had whizzed across the ceiling right above him, entirely too aware and close to be ignored. The dissolution spell to get rid of it had cost him dearly — and not because that stupid footman, blind to the real threat, overreacted and drew on him. Spells were powered by talent, will, and ch'i. And Seishiro had precious little ch'i to spend at the moment.

The trail ended in front of the fourth door to the right. The brass doorknob sizzled briefly when he drew the opening pentagram around it, releasing the last hint of an old warding spell. Seishiro silently opened the door a crack, careful not to move his hand cross the threshold. Another warding spell vibrated inside; a lot more potent than the frayed one attached to the handle. Though he felt no repercussions built into it, Seishiro was pretty sure it would light up like Shinjuku at night should anybody not invited set his foot onto the tatami covering the floor inside. Interesting, given that it sung with the same signature as the shiki. The room itself was empty. A single window towards the yard and the main house beyond illuminated the sparsely furnished room: a futon, a table with two chairs, and the obligatory home shrine attached to the wall. He recognized a plate for Amaterasu between two small memorial plaques for deceased relatives. Pristine white China dishes held the ritual offerings of rice and sake—

"May I help you?" a calm voice said behind him. Seishiro turned. A man of average size studied him with disapproving grey eyes behind slightly rectangular, half-rimmed prescription glasses. The tumbler with a toothbrush in his hand and the damp towel over his arm were a clear indication where he'd come from. "Shiro Ameru, resident of this room."

"Sakurazuka." He opened his hand and revealed the shopping receipt that had been a gecko shiki the night before. "I've come to return your pet."

"You better come in." Shiro went past him and opened the door fully, withdrawing the powerful ward without any obvious sign. He gestured Seishiro to follow him, indicating one of the chairs at the table under the window. "Please excuse the lack of hospitality. I didn't get tea from the kitchen yet." He put the toiletries aside and took the second chair.

Seishiro judged him to be in his fifties. The nondescript business slacks and white shirt weren't expensive, but probably a little too light for the place and the season. Not one of Michiko's people. He put the former makeshift fuda on the table between them. "How much do you know?"

"I know you're Sakurazukamori. I know you brought incredible harm to this clan and its people." The grey eyes watched him calmly. "I also know that you're one of the sources of the revitalized Dao — together with Subaru." Subaru. Not 'Sumeragi' or 'head'. Interesting. "And that you are being reasonable about it."

Seishiro arched a brow. "I didn't think they'd publicize that last bit."

"They didn't." Shiro laid his hand pointedly onto the piece of paper between them.

"I see." Seishiro smiled, showing teeth. "In that case I have a question."

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#### Sumeragi Family Residence

The sun had risen over the horizon, bathing the faces of the worshipers in its light. The final bell rang out. The last clap of hands followed and the neat rows dissolved when people headed for their morning meal and the other tasks their schedule held on this Sunday.

Subaru watched the white-clad figures leave while he stood, the early sun now warm on his back. The sky overhead was of a clear, translucent blue, the faint rose coloring of Amaterasu's arrival fading quickly and leaving him on his own.

After changing out of his ceremonial robes, he would break his own fast with his grandmother, completing their interrupted exchange from the previous evening. Subaru drew a deep breath of crisp morning air, squared his shoulders and headed back to the house to change into a yukata. He was not looking forward to this.

The morning meal of white rice, pickled vegetables, miso soup and tea had been laid out already by the time he arrived in his grandmother's rooms. A high, almost Western style table with a single wooden chair for him accommodated her wheelchair. Additional protective charms had been worked into the arrangement of the food. A wind chime played beyond the closed shoji on the engawa. Even Maki, his grandmother's personal maid for as long as he remembered, bowed and left them alone after escorting him in, closing the fusuma behind him. He wouldn't be surprised to find her outside guarding the wall against eavesdroppers.

"I regret the unseemly haste, Subaru-san." His grandmother indicated the set table. "But certainly you see the problems in the current situation." Subaru nodded and pulled out the uncushioned chair to sit down. He didn't pick up his chopsticks. He wasn't going to eat. "What happened for the police to inquire about you?"

Subaru drew a deep breath. "Three nights ago, I needed Amaterasu's purifying flames within a sealed pentagram. Had I not invoked them, we would know by now if the Dao still requires both of its sources alive."

His grandmother, reaching for the rice, froze. "What did you do, grandson?" she asked, her voice toneless. Her dish remained empty.

"There is only one goddess who carries the sun in the darkness," he said softly. "Ka—"

Her gnarled hand closed over his mouth. "Don't say the name of the black one in my room! You—" She stopped herself, startled, staring at him horrified. "You called *Her*." It wasn't a question.

"I called Amaterasu," Subaru corrected, "through Her."

His grandmother inhaled sharply, composing herself. "What happened?"

"She — Amaterasu — answered." He avoided her eyes, looked down on his hands. "*Both* answered."

Silence. When he opened his mouth to explain, his grandmother inquired with a tremor in her voice, "What did *She* make you do?"

"Prosecute the one responsible for harming the Dao." He'd expected that question. His answer was one way to put it. Murder — at least, assistance to murder, if he believed Seishiro's claim of the Tree's responsibility — was another.

"The Dao or the Sakurazukamori?"

"Both. As you well know." At her sharp glance, he added, "She is the goddess of death and truth."

"We will not speak of it." His grandmother's voice was composed, almost brittle, declaring the uncomfortable fact as insignificant. "Are the police aware of your subsequent acts?"

He shook his head. "No." They'd questioned him because of Seishiro, not because of... "I purified myself afterwards."

"Subaru-san," she said sternly. "Purification appeases the gods, but rest assured, it doesn't appease the people. We aren't common folk. We are Sumeragi. *Diviners*. Purity and impeccable reputation are what ensures our social standing. Without these virtues and the ties to Amaterasu-no-mikoto, we'd face ostracism as hisabetsumin. It is foolish to believe that modern times changed that. You have to look no farther than your ill-begotten housemate for proof! The Black Goddess—"

Subaru had heard enough. "I'm not here to discuss Kali," he cut her off, ignoring her gasp at the name. "Or the Sakurazukamori. What concerns me are the Sumeragi. The Dao enforced symmetry — not only in its sources but also in the spiritual balance itself. Cases are no longer clear-cut his or mine. We have to cooperate or—"

"Cooperate?" his grandmother interrupted him, white-faced. "Are you telling me you *collaborated* with the Sakurazukamori? Did you participate in his *bloodwork*?"

"Of course not!" He ground his teeth. He'd done his own.

"Yet you call Shiva's wife by name in this house and the police inquired about your virtue." She shook her head. "You can't possibly address the elders in your current state."

"I can and I will!" Subaru stood briskly. "The meeting this evening is not negotiable! Have the clan present as well. I've got an announcement to make and I prefer to make it only once."

"As you wish." She studied him sadly. "But last night's events did not go unnoticed, Subaru-san. It might well be that the council has to make an announcement of its own regarding you."

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## Sumeragi Family Residence — West Wing

Keeping to the shadows, Seishiro trailed the woman in white out on to the engawa and followed her around the house. Shiro's information had been... unexpected, to say the least. So his Subaru-kun had a fiancée — a detail he hadn't bothered to mention in their conversations over the last four months — and things hadn't gone as smoothly as his clan had expected of him. To the contrary; even after eight years, the bride still wore white as tradition demanded until she became wife. Shiro had tried to gloss over details, but filling in the blanks of what was left unsaid had been easy enough. It certainly explained a lot. It also gave him a target, though it didn't seem prudent to go after her now. However...

Seishiro pushed his glasses higher up the bridge of his nose and began to weave his illusion. Akiko, former Mikage not yet Sumeragi, corresponded perfectly to the traditional ideal: demure posture, small dainty steps. The gauze veil she'd pinned to her hair to draw attention to her scarred face barely fluttered as she walked. She hid her strength well. Very well. His left hand itched as the illusion closed around her. A flutter of sakura petals stopped her, had her turn and search in wonder for the source of it. There were no sakura trees on the Sumeragi compound and the ume trees near the house were already out of bloom.

"I'd like to have a word with you, Akiko-san," he said behind her. "It's about time you stop living off Subaru-kun's guilt."

"I'm not 'living off anyone's guilt!'" she protested, turning. "Who are y—?"

"Not?" He let his eyes travel down her white costume. "I recognize a Hanae Mori design when I see one. There's nothing on your face that a good surgeon couldn't correct, but it's so much easier to stay scarred and pining, isn't it?"

"Easier?!" she gasped, indignant. "I'm dead to my family, crossed-out in our registry, but I'm not reborn to the Sumeragi. I'm *in between*, forever without color, without status, without *name*!"

"And conveniently without responsibility," Seishiro completed coldly. "You are aware that there's more than one way to correct your 'status of in between', aren't you?" he asked with a casual shrug. "I might help you with that."

"How—" Her dark eyes widened at the sigil scars on his hands he hadn't bothered to conceal. "Sakurazukamori." She glanced around at scholars and servants walking past without seeing them. "I'll scream."

"And you think you'd be heard?" he asked pleasantly. "I don't make beginners' mistakes, A-chan." He took a business card from his wallet. "The address of a plastic surgeon in Tokyo. Get yourself treated. You have fourteen days. Otherwise I'll opt for a more terminal solution." He nodded politely at her. "If you excuse me—"

She glared at him. "You won't hurt me," she declared. "Subaru-san would never forgive you."

"Not?" Seishiro was genuinely amused now, despite the dull ache that had begun throbbing behind his eyes. "I killed his sister and he sleeps in my bed." He deliberately gave her his back, unraveling the illusion around her as he returned to the house, chuckling. "I'll take the chance."

~::~::~~

## Sumeragi Family Residence

The house was filled with whispers, reverberating in Subaru's head when he left his grandmother to a morning meal that had become cold over their dispute. ...*an announcement...* ...*with him in front of the kamidana...* He closed the fusuma separating his room from the rest of the house with an audible thud.

Seishiro looked up from his book. "The elders will meet at nightfall," Subaru told him candidly.

"Good. Then there's still time to rest." Seishiro put the book aside and shrugged out of his jacket, hanging it around the back of the chair. The bright red silk lining glowed like fresh blood where the sunlight touched it. The shoji were opened a hand's width, but the room still smelled of incense. New reverence lights burned in front of the kamidana. In his absence, paper cranes had been offered to Amaterasu as apology for the lack of lights in the dark.

*Last night's events.* Subaru balled his fist.

Beside him, Seishiro loosened his tie, then tugged it free. A whiff of sakura wafted around him. Subaru frowned. "Where have you been?"

"Outside. Admiring your gardens." He laid the tie over his jacket, heading for the closet holding the futons. "Exceptional nadeshiko."

Subaru stopped him. "Don't give me this nonsense. I smell the sakura on you! What did you do?"

Seishiro looked back to him. "I had a word with your fiancée. It's tiresome to be woken in the middle of the night—"

Subaru stiffened.

"She's alive." Seishiro snorted, opening the closet. "For now."

"Leave her alone." Subaru caught his arm. "Akiko isn't the guilty party in this."



"Indeed." Seishiro narrowed his eyes at the grip— the name— and pushed him back. "And neither are you."

"Not?" Subaru laughed out bitterly. "Believe me, I am guilty! Guilty of lying with the enemy. Guilty of not getting a wife, of not begetting an heir! But you wouldn't know the first thing about that, would you? You—"

Seishiro's flat hand slammed against the closet beside his head. "No, I just have to get myself killed, right? Preferably ten years ago by somebody the Mori approv—!"

Killed. The scent of sakura. Light eyes—

Subaru kissed him. Deep. Open-mouthed. Drinking his breath. Angry. Aggressive. Seishiro's body along his. Heartbeats. Fast. Sweat. Heat. So much heat...

Not killed. Alive—

Subaru shivered. This felt so terribly right. He raised his head, looked at Seishiro, truly looked, not avoiding the eyes, *not hiding*. Breathing was difficult. His heart raced as if he'd been running...

...he was no longer running. "Take me," he demanded, untying his obi. "Now. Before the council."

Seishiro froze, actually took a step back. "Are you nuts?"

"Not anymore." Subaru's tongue flicked over his dry lips. "I'm done hiding what I want."

"And you want to pay me off that urgently?" A caustic tone. Unsteady eyes.

Subaru wouldn't have it. "Not payment. You." He closed the distance, consciously breathing him in, open-eyed replacing incense with sakura. "I want you." Those glasses had to go. He picked them off Seishiro's nose, tossing them onto the folded futon. "Now."

Unsteadiness gone. Seishiro reached for their toiletry bag.

Subaru caught his wrist. "No. I want it to hurt."

A sharp jerk. "You maybe, I certainly not!" Seishiro emptied the bag onto the shelf, found the flask. Uncapped it, one-handed, with a flick of his thumb, while opening his fly. Business, not heat, not *yet*—

"I need—" Subaru dug his hands into Seishiro's hair, tugged, felt— Seishiro's hand between his legs, spreading him roughly, wetting him— followed by— he cried out at the first unmitigated thrust, clung desperately to Seishiro for support, for—

People came running, stopped when he groaned at Seishiro's deep moves. *Let them know*, he thought fiercely. *Let them all know*.

Amaterasu's reverence lights flickered in the draft from the shoji. He drove his teeth through the cloth into Seishiro's shoulder, tasted blood, and cried out again when his semen stained the yukata that had ridden up his hips.

18:31

Subaru heard the whispering, the hissed comments to his side and behind his back as he crossed the big hall; head held high, back straight. There was no pretense left. He was done hiding his flaws. He didn't have to listen. He knew what they were talking about; had known before he'd even left his room; had made sure that he'd know.

He'd given his body to the enemy.

He'd made himself unfit to be their ruler. In *their* eyes.

He still had the taste of Seishiro's blood on his tongue, grounding him.

He ignored the cushion laid out in front of the dais before the elders. *Subaru-san's cushion*.

The place of the head of the house was in the center. *On* the dais. With the elders around and behind him, while the seats to his immediate left and right were reserved to be given specifically to people *he favored*.

They wouldn't like his choice, but they didn't have to like it.

The hall fell silent when he climbed the dais and waited for flustered servants to rearrange the sitting cushions accordingly. He took his time settling down, neatly arranging kimono folds and hakama. He had summoned them. Tradition forbade them to take the word until he had spoken, even if he was beyond contempt in their eyes, even if he was to be ousted. For this one speech, he still held absolute power. This once, he was going to use it.

Subaru drew a deep breath and clapped his hands. Once.

"For thirteen-hundred years, we Sumeragi have protected Japan according to our oath, given to Shotoku-taishi on his deathbed. Yet all this time, we utterly failed in our task."

Shocked gasps rang out. He'd expected it.

"Because we neglected our duty to one of Japan's servants. We handle the spiritual forces that have no place among living beings. We ignored the fact that many of these spirits don't linger of their own free will, but were called forth and used by living people." He surveyed the hall to make sure he had their full attention before he continued. "The revitalized Dao requires both sides of a case to be addressed properly: spirit *and*

human perpetrator. I am well aware that we are ill-equipped to handle the second. However, the Sakurazukamori—"

"Subaru-san—" his grandmother began.

"—protects Japan against those who willfully violate the world of spirit, just as we protect it against spirits who willfully enter the world of the living. As one of its servants, he deserves the same spiritual protection as the country he serves, as stated in the Jushichijo Kenpo<sup>51</sup>, written and proclaimed by Shotoku-taishi himself. We may abhor the Sakurazukamori's work, but under the revitalized Dao — of which he and I myself are the sources — we can no longer afford to ignore our duty out of unfounded enmity—"

"Unfounded enmity!?" Behind him, elder Tomoaki jumped to his feet. "He killed your sister!"

"I am aware of that, but that does not change our duty, nor our failure in it." Subaru turned back to the general audience. "Therefore, we will reconstitute the Onmyo-ryo. Not as part of the ministry of Home Affairs, but as coordination office between the Sakurazukamori and us. Preparations for this are being carried out as we speak. I will see the minister of Home Affairs in person first thing tomorrow.

"In order for smooth cooperation with the Sakurazuka—"

"We cannot possibly cooperate with an enemy of the house! The feud—"

"It is the head of a house who declares a feud," Subaru cut in. "It is also within his jurisdiction to end it. It is ended! We can no longer afford the arrogance of embracing the Dao and rejecting one of its sources at the same time." He briefly queried his marks, making sure Seishiro was waiting outside.

"Good cooperation is essential for our success under the revitalized Dao. However, I know this isn't going to be easy, especially in the beginning. Therefore, I will offer the position at my right to the Sakurazukamori, while I will take a seat in consulting capacity on the advisory board of the Sakurazuka."

"You involve us in bloodshed!" Elder Makoto slapped her hand flat on the ground before her.

"No. We will not be involved in the execution of his work any more than he will be present at our exorcisms." Subaru nodded at her. Makoto was one of the most level-headed voices on the council. If she accepted his reasoning...

He drew a deep breath. "However, for the first time, we will be able to determine properly whether an execution is necessary or if an exorcism and spiritual healing of the offender will suffice. Moreover, we will be able to attempt an exorcism even in those cases which until now went straight to the Sakurazuka because of the danger involved. In addition to this, we will gain protection for our people in their work against intransigent offenders." He nodded at Hamamatsu, guarding the door. "Please request that the first adviser join us, Hamamatsu-kun. This concerns him as well from now on."

"You should not practice politics with what's between your legs," Tomoaki snapped.

"Because it's not yours, Tomoaki-san?" Subaru asked calmly. He nodded a quiet welcome to Seishiro, who entered the hall following a seething Hamamatsu. The hall was deadly silent as he proceeded towards the dais in his grey replacement suit. People didn't actually shrink from him, but somehow the aisle appeared wider. *Leave it to Seishiro to make a pale pink shirt look threatening.* Subaru studied the hall full of shocked faces while Seishiro settled down at his side.

"I am aware that all this comes as a surprise to you all," he continued. "But in fact it is only the official declaration of our practice these last four months. We—"

"Enough!" His grandmother clapped her hands. "We heard enough of this farce. We won't have it." The other elders around her nodded with grave expressions. "Sumeragi Subaru, it pains me, but from now on you are no longer the thirteenth head of the Sumeragi. Your unhealthy infatuation with the Sakurazukamori renders you unfit to represent our interests—"

"I advise you strongly to reconsider that," Seishiro interrupted her coldly. "I will not accept a second addition to my advisory board. So if you want to have a say in the upcoming events at all, you will have to go along with Subaru-kun; otherwise you are out of business."

~::~::~~

20:37

Seishiro sat on the edge of the engawa, his back to the house. Their taxi would arrive soon. They would make it in time for the last Shinkansen back to Tokyo and a brief rest without fires and incense. Subaru had insisted on leaving tonight. Tomorrow would be as taxing as today had been, though the Ministry of Home Affairs shouldn't pose a problem.

Seishiro chuckled humorlessly. The current minister of Home Affairs was Hori Kosuke; coincidentally also the current chairman of the National Public Safety Commission. Given the number of borderline cases, he'd

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51 Jushichijo Kenpo, the seven articles constitution of Japan, established 603 by Prince Shotoku and embraced by Empress Suiko, remained undisputedly in effect until 1890, when the constitution of the Empire of Japan replaced it.

put money on it that 'Ko-kun' would be glad to hand the responsibility for assigning cases to people who actually knew what they were doing.

However, given that they were essentially restructuring Japan's spiritual protection, there was another authority to consult, one whom he'd successfully avoided so far. If anybody could get the Sumeragi to actively support their plans, it was him. Seishiro sighed and dragged at his cigarette again. His eyes followed the thin thread of smoke, curling up from the bright glow of its tip into the dark sky. That help wouldn't come cheap.

He looked up when rubber wheels neared on the engawa. Subaru's grandmother stopped at the sight of him, watched him. "Are you satisfied?" she asked finally.

He snorted. "Hardly."

"Then why did you do that to him?"

"It is easier to do what must be done if you know you can't sink lower in the regard of those you hold dear."

"Is that your reasoning behind that atrocity?" the old woman inquired icily.

"No." Seishiro sucked at the rest of his cigarette, then snipped its stump into the stone garden and stood. "It's why I didn't stop him."

## Interregnum 6

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
April 16, 2000 — 21:48

The small shisa next to Sachiko's and Hokuto's spirit tablets raised its head and growled deep in its throat. A moment later, somebody knocked. Ameru stood, gave the upset guardian spirit a brief pat on the vermillion mane, and opened the door.

"Shiro-san." Sumeragi Hamamatsu stood in the hallway, bowing to him. "If you would follow me. The elders request your presence at the council."

First, that shift of power in the estate wards, and now they were calling him to council? Ameru frowned. Hamamatsu was already looking impatient.

"I'm coming." He took his jacket from the hanger and closed the door behind him.

The great hall was full of people. Fusuma separated the elders from the rest of the clan. Tripods holding shallow bowls of glowing embers and incense warded the dais. Guards sat beside them, watching the open fire as much as protecting the elder council against eavesdroppers. Apparently, the topic wasn't meant for the ears of commoners yet, but the assembled clan hadn't been dismissed. Murmurs arose as Ameru followed Hamamatsu to the screened dais. Murmurs about who he had been.

A guard he didn't know by name moved the fusuma aside and let him enter. The room inside was dimmed, lit mostly by the fire within an iron tea stove around which the elders had formed a half circle. A cushion was laid out before them. For him.

Ameru bowed low and then sat down, feeling the cloth of his suit pants strain against his knees. He waited silently. He knew better than to rush *her*.

"Ameru-san," she acknowledged him, avoiding the matter of the family name with the joviality of old people. "It's been a long time since you were here."

He bowed slightly. It was plain truth. In 1979, a month after his father's death, he'd sat in front of a similar council to be stripped of his identity and sent away to father a child prophesied to save the world on the final day of 1999. The woman destined to bear that child had turned out to be a 15-year-old girl who had wanted him no more than he had wanted to leave Sachiko. Ameru clamped his jaws tight at the memory. He'd felt like a pedophile touching that awkward girl. And Tohru-san hadn't conceived easily.

"I think you know why we summoned you, nephew," Tomoaki stated. "Your son—"

"Kamui's in Tokyo, Tomoaki-san," Ameru said softly.

His mother's hand twitched. "We are speaking of Subaru-san," she clarified stiffly. "And his public indecency with the Sakurazukamori."

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Sakura Enterprises, Osaka  
21:56

Fujiwara Michiko, Chief of Operations of Sakura Enterprises Shikoku Section, closed the door of her office behind her and locked it. She sat down behind her desk and for a moment, just buried her face in her hands. For twenty years now she'd worked for the Mori. And Seishiro had been the Sakurazukamori. She'd met him the first time a few weeks before her sister gave birth. The Osaka office had sent her to assist him, but he hadn't wanted assistance; just a driver.

"You're Mariko's sister," had been the first thing he'd said to her and for a long time that had been his only comment. No question. No inquiry. It had been a statement of fact, not interest, while her nondescript compact car sped towards Kobe harbor's freight terminal on Port Island. She'd been taught that the Sakurazukamori was the last, the final line of spiritual defense for Japan when all else failed. There'd be no second chance should he fall. And the Sakurazukamori next to her on the passenger seat was barely nineteen years old.

She hadn't thought he could win against a fully-fledged demonar until she saw what he was capable of. And what he could take, if need be. One of the fire demon's claws had opened his belly, had torn into his stomach, and still he had chanted, channeling the Sakura. That was when she'd learned that the Tree could heal — at a price. Port Island had lost a wharf that day, but the demonar had been contained and Seishiro...

She remembered him virtually unconscious in her car afterwards, reeking of blood and intestines; remembered his refusal to be brought to a place registered with the organization. They'd ended up parking

the car in a deserted industrial lane. She remembered his groaning, his hisses of agony... and something else she hadn't dared ask about.

Seishiro was a force to be reckoned with. She knew he'd kill her without a thought should his position demand it, as she had voted to destroy him when he'd been caught with the Sumeragi. She hadn't been worried then — but she should have been. With Honshu out of commission, she was the section leader closest to Tokyo. She'd be the one called to serve the Tree — something Seishiro had no doubt taken into account. If he lost his position, she would go to Tokyo and somebody else would be sent to rule Shikoku section. She'd have to make sure Mariko and the children were gone by then. However, it would be a lot better for them all if he just remained the Sakurazukamori...

Her hand fell to the intercom. "Contact Hokkaido, Korea, and Kyushu. Tell them Shikoku as working section closest to Honshu is calling for a section leader meeting in fifteen minutes."

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Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence  
22:02

*Public indecency. With the Sakurazukamori.*

Ameru knew he should pay attention to what the elders were saying. The shisa had warned him of them, but it hadn't warned of the Sakurazukamori, who had slept with his son. No, with whom his son slept—

Did that distinction really matter? Would it have mattered between him and Sachiko? His head swirled while he forced himself to follow their words. Today, Subaru had ended a thirteen-hundred-years old feud and called his lover to his side, defying the elders. He tried to reconcile that with the photograph of the resigned, grey-eyed man he'd taken in Tokyo almost a year ago—

"Ameru-san," his mother addressed him. "You are born Sumeragi. Certainly you see that Subaru cannot remain head of the house when he involves us in bloodshed. You had to forgo the headship in order to fulfill the prophecy your father penned on his deathbed. It is within the law for you to reclaim it, now that the year of decision has passed. As your son, Subaru is subject to your decisions."

Ameru said nothing. The man who'd casually traced the ofuda of the gecko shiki back to him hadn't cared for the intricacies of Sumeragi law. But because of him Subaru had stood up against the council — something Ameru should have done when they'd taken the twins twenty-three years ago. He balled his fists. He wouldn't fail Subaru again. "With all due respect, honored elders," he said. "I cannot see your point. Certainly, Subaru-sama can expect privacy in his own rooms."

"For sleeping with the Sakurazukamori?" Tomoaki asked incredulously.

"If he chooses to do so," Ameru shrugged. "Yes."

"Ameru-san. The Sakurazukamori is also the murderer of your daughter." Elder Makoto took the word for the first time. "Can you forgive that?"

Ameru closed his eyes briefly. "No. I cannot forgive that. But I can see why my son needs him." He faced his mother in midst of the elders. "I refuse the position. The thirteenth head of the Sumeragi is Subaru."

~::~::~~

Sakura Enterprises, Osaka  
22:16

Three of the four monitors on the wall were lit when Michiko entered, checked the security, and locked the room. Blurred frames behind desks similar to the one here were waiting for her; the fourth — Honshu — remained dark.

Michiko squared her shoulders and straightened her suit before sitting down and activating the line.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Three days ago, in the afternoon of April 13, we all were witnesses to the Sumeragi head entering our Tokyo offices and destroying the section's Chief of Operations. Since then, Honshu section has been inactive and Shikoku, as the closest functional section, is handling the Sakurazukamori until Honshu is fully restored. This is the matter requiring your attention."

Michiko drew a deep breath. "Colleagues. After reviewing the footage from Honshu section in detail, I have come to the conclusion that we made a grave mistake. When we decided to remove Sakurazuka Seishiro from office, we ignored the Sakura itself. It is evident that the Sakura does not consider Sakurazuka's involvement with the Sumeragi transgression. Therefore, Shikoku considers his removal from office invalid."

Silence. Michiko held her breath. If she had miscalculated, she was dead. They wouldn't let her live if they doubted her loyalty to the organization. She—

=Seconded,"= Korea said calmly.  
=Ditto.= Hokkaido chuckled. =It is easier to replace an unfit COO than a fit Sakurazukamori.=  
=Accepted,= Kyushu signaled grudgingly. =But that doesn't change the fact that the Sumeragi invaded our Tokyo offices to avenge the assault on his lover. We can't leave such a challenge unanswered. The Sumeragi—=

"Indeed, Kyushu-san," Michiko cut in sharply. "Hokkaido-san. And that is our second point tonight. We do not have to replace Honshu's COO and Sumeragi did *not* invade our offices."

=We all saw him killing Honshu-san!:= Korea exclaimed.

"The *former* Honshu-san," Michiko specified coolly. "As you can see—" She displayed a still frame showing Sakurazuka Romiro being ground to death by sakura petals in front of Sumeragi's booted feet. "The current Honshu-san is Sumeragi."

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence — West Wing  
22:26

"I'm just scared." Akiko cradled the receiver of the mobile phone between her shoulder and ear and folded a second white blouse on top of the white pants suit already in her suitcase. "What if it doesn't work? What if... it isn't sufficient in *his* eyes?"

A clearly audible snort came from the other end of the line. =You don't have to do this at all!:= Her brother declared. =I'll go and drive some sense into that jerk—=

"No!" Akiko clasped the receiver as she straightened. "No, Ayato. This is the man who killed Subaru-san's sister and walked away from it. I don't want to lose you."

=From all I heard, his sister was magically inept.=

"But Subaru-san isn't." Akiko suppressed a sigh and looked at the small home shrine she'd set up for Inari. The reverence candles she'd lit earlier flickered in their vermilion stands. Inari, her former family's kami, had always given her comfort in the cold glory of the Sumeragi's sun. But since this morning it seemed as if the god's dutiful fox spirits were laughing at her, laughing and heckling while leaping after sakura petals dancing on the wind. She shuddered, returning her attention to the phone. "I know it's late, but can you pick me up? I'm going to call Matsubara-sensei tomorrow."

=Of course, but you shouldn't do this because a murderer threatened you.=

"I know. And thank you for caring." She closed the line and dropped the mobile phone on top of the folded clothes in her suitcase. *I'm not doing this because the Sakurazukamori threatened me*, she told herself. *I'm doing this because he's got a point.*

The bargain among their families hadn't been kept and it was Subaru-san who'd been kind enough not to pressure her about it. Most other men — certainly most of his elders — would have sent her away, not caring what became of her. A woman without child never became wife, but what about the groom? She hadn't thought about that, but she honestly didn't want him to suffer a lonely life because of her. She stilled—

*—he sleeps in my bed."*

Maybe he hadn't been lonely. Maybe, she'd freed him to pursue a life his elders wouldn't approve of. Maybe—

—she ought to stop lying to herself.

Akiko slammed her suitcase shut. She'd call the doctor tomorrow.

~::~::~~

CLAMP Campus, Tokyo  
University Hospital  
23:55

Akechi Shigetaka shielded his eyes with his arm as the dark, unmarked helicopter swept in to hover barely a meter above the landing platform. An agile, black-clad man jumped down to the roof and ran towards him, ducked against the whirling rotor blades already pulling the machine back into the night sky.

Akechi closed his hand around his older half-brother's lower arm and smiled, receiving the same close wordless welcome in return. It had been years since they'd seen each other in person. Ijyuin Shigetoshi was still surprisingly fit, given that he'd turned fifty three years ago. The price and the benefit of his fame... so to speak.

"Do you have the file?" he asked.

Instead of an answer, Akechi patted his waist, making the folder hidden there outline under the cloth, and indicated the door leading from the roof. They rode the elevators to sub level one. From the backdoor near the morgue, it was only a short way through the park and unlit gardens to Imonoyama's residence.

The mansion itself was dark, appearing for all that mattered as if its inhabitants had gone to bed early, still the service door to the yard opened before the two of them had even left the shadow of the trees. No lights inside, either. Imonoyama was a dark shadow against the black interior as he held the door for them. "Welcome," he said, closing it soundlessly and Akechi blinked in the sudden brightness of the ceiling lights coming to life. "I'm sorry that I can't offer you the front door."

"Unexpired statutes of limitation tend to affect your social affairs." Ijyuin shrugged and smiled. "Comes with the business."

Imonoyama nodded. "I've jammed the library and the adjacent rooms. Conferring there should be safe." He led the way up a narrow staircase. "But we have to make it quick. The jamming affects surrounding buildings as well and I'd prefer to keep Suoh ignorant of our meeting." With a wry smile, he added, "He gets testy when I receive guests he's not allowed to pat down."

"I wouldn't mind," Ijyuin laughed, "but he might find more than he was looking for."

"That's what I'd like to prevent," Imonoyama said dryly and opened the library.

The room was cozy as usual. The heavy velvet curtains were drawn and the flames of the lit fireplace made shadows run over the dark bookshelves lining the walls up to the ceiling. The thick, light-golden patterned carpet with its blood-red crest cushioned his brother's and Imonoyama's steps. Akechi closed the door and followed them. His arm pressed firmly against the file inside his jacket.

Imonoyama checked the display of a small device set on one of the tables under the windows, nodded and turned. "We're green. So what's so urgent a matter that you risk coming to Tokyo in person?"

"I think it's easiest if I just give you the file," Akechi answered instead of his brother, opening his jacket to retrieve the manila folder and hand it to Imonoyama. Beside him, Ijyuin nodded, then headed for the small bar in the corner and poured himself a drink. He offered one to Akechi as well, while their host sat down in one of the comfy armchairs and read. Akechi accepted the glass gratefully.

After a few sips, Ijyuin, leaning with his hip against the bar, asked, "Does Akira know?"

"No." Akechi had a sip of his drink, Their father had disappeared long before his nephew was born. It wasn't his hunt. Yet. The alcohol was burning in his throat; here was a reason he usually preferred tea. "Speaking of Akira," he said, putting the glass down, "have you seen him recently?"

"It's become difficult since he's got a family of his own to worry about." His brother shrugged. "And a pediatrician isn't as newsworthy as Nijyo Menso."

"You could play Santa for his sons as well," Akechi suggested.

"And rob him of his privilege?" His brother laughed. "I'm not that kind of thief." He swirled the remaining liquid in his glass briefly, downed it in a single gulp, and looked at the folder now lying open on Imonoyama's knees. "But I'm worried about *him*. Sakurazuka, the rumors about that house..." He shook his head. "Even if only the gist of it is true—"

"I don't believe it," Imonoyama interrupted, looking up at last. "That's—" He ran a hand through his hair and laughed uneasily. "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to wrap my mind around the fact that the forbidden number in my phone book is actually Akira's... *uncle*?"

"Did that *forbidden number* ever mention his father?" Ijyuin asked.

"Not that I recall. Seishiro's a schoolfriend of mine." Imonoyama said stiffly. "We weren't *that* close."

"A schoolfriend I had as a patient last year," Akechi challenged, "with injuries that would have required a hospital station if not an ECU. Yet *you* insisted on treating him here."

"His previous experiences with hospitals weren't agreeable. I merely respected his wish not to see the inside of one again." Imonoyama put the folder aside and stood. "If that's all—"

"Did you ever meet your friend's family?" Ijyuin asked calmly from the bar, ignoring the impending dismissal.

"No." Imonoyama shrugged. "He's always been very reclusive about his family."

"I see." Ijyuin set his glass down and straightened. "Then do you know how to contact him about this?"

"I've been to his house before." Akechi reminded him. "I'm confident I can find it again, should the need arise."

"You sure?"

Akechi nodded. "But we should be careful. When I treated him, I noticed signs of abuse in his formative years. We don't know how he'll react if we just show up on his doorstep asking about his past."

"According to your blood test Akira-kun has an uncle he'd befriended at school and we have a brother we didn't know about." His brother fixed him squarely. "Born in the year our father disappeared. Something I cannot — and will not — ignore."

"I concur with Akechi-sensei here," Imonoyama said into the aggressive silence between them. "Seishiro isn't an easy character to begin with. Surprising him will get you nowhere. You have to be careful with him."

Very careful." Imonoyama actually laid a hand on both their sleeves, as if willing them to calm down. His quiet words held a strange emphasis. "You do *not* want to threaten him."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Akechi asked calmly. "Let it be is no option."

Imonoyama sighed. "Speak with Sumeragi-san first. Alone," he stressed. "He knows him better than I do these days. I can arrange for a meeting, but it might take a while."

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
April 17, 2000 — 01:17

It was well past midnight when Yue felt his temporary ward approaching the house. The Sakura hadn't told him about Sei-chan's return, thus he assumed they hadn't come by the park. The pentagram ornament on the garden wall outside the gate creaked, but the spirit soldiers remained quiet, so there was no obvious need to hurry. Lady ginkgo rustled above him. The female tree carried the seal he had cut into her trunk over eighty years ago with obvious pride. Sumeragi-san's ferns, growing thick around her roots, whispered with delicate fronds already reaching above his knees. Yue looked up into the ragged, dark crown and bowed earnestly over his folded hands at her, before relocating his attention to the front garden.

Sei-chan appeared worn, though he stubbornly insisted on walking on his own. Sumeragi seemed worried about that, given the way he trailed a step behind as if to catch him if necessary.

"Fool." Yue manifested beside them, grabbing Sei-chan under the arm.

"Begone," his successor growled and Yue drew on the Sakura's power to overrule the command. Sei-chan was cold to the touch, and his heartbeat was too slow. Yue shook his head. The Sakura had healed the body, but replacing spilled blood and lost ch'i was impossible. The Tree merely kept the body alive until blood and ch'i had been rebuilt. It wasn't the same as being fit and about in a moment. Far from it. Sei-chan was aware of that — at least theoretically — but he seemed scarily determined to ignore the implications. Sumeragi seemed oblivious.

"Open the door," Yue told Sumeragi. "I can pass through. He can't."

His successor propped himself against the wall to kick off his shoes after the door had closed. "Stubborn fool," Yue stated.

"Shut up. It was necessary." Seishiro yanked his tie loose and worked down the button line of his shirt as he slowly went up the stairs towards his bedroom, pointedly ignoring Yue's presence beside him.

"There was a suicide, stopping the Yamanote between Ueno and Uguisudani," Sumeragi provided quietly. "That's why it took too long and—"

"One should think suicidal idiots would jump at rush hour for maximum impact on travelers!" Seishiro snarled, tossing his shirt across the desk on the way to the bed.

"One should think recently spirit-healed Sakurazukamori would leave a safety window when calculating their traveling times," Yue returned, stabilizing him when he lost balance shedding his pants. Yue sat him down on the bed, straightened...

...and found himself face to face with a Sumeragi, who watched him wordlessly for a moment and just left.

He seemed as worn as Sei-chan, probably more so. There'd been a different kind of ache in those green eyes, painfully familiar even after fourteen-hundred years. Yue stopped the line of thought abruptly. The Sakura didn't need a second reason for jealousy towards the other source of the Dao, now sitting on Sei-chan's couch, lean face buried in his hands.

Yue faded into the kitchen and queried the guardian dead how to use the coffee maker. Ten minutes later, he hovered a steaming cup in front of Sumeragi's face, smiling when surprise briefly replaced weariness.

"We still have to talk, Second-source-of-the-Dao," he said and sat down on top of the kotatsu without bothering about pushing some of the clutter over the edge.

"There's nothing to talk about," Sumeragi said flatly, nevertheless taking the cup, clasping it for its warmth.

"It was necessary," Yue reminded him softly, making sure the coffee didn't slosh out of the cup.

"I committed murder." Sumeragi raised a hand as if to stop the expected reply. "And no, I can't take the Sakura's involvement as justification for my crime or for forcing my people to bear the stain of the blood I spilled. I—" He closed his mouth abruptly, as if he had just now realized he was revealing all that to a ghost whom he was supposed to exorcise.

"No crime," Yue said firmly. "If spilling blood to defend what's important stains you, then all samurai were *eta*.<sup>52</sup> It is the duty of a clan head to make his people see reason, to force it upon them if necessary. You acted as what you are, based on what you know and they don't understand. Yet. Do not belittle that." Sumeragi glanced at him shocked. "I was forced to make the same decision in life," Yue reminded him. "I

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52 *Eta* is a highly derogatory name (literally "filthy mass") for the outcasts in feudal Japan, who worked in occupations related to death.



can't say I regret the results. And neither should you. You defended what you were supposed to defend and eliminated the threat to your loved one afterwards."

Silence.

"You were there," Sumeragi said at last. "Under the tree. Did... did I hurt him?"

Yue contemplated his answer for a moment.

"No," he said finally. "Kali took Shiva. She gave life where it was almost lost. No child remembers the pain of birth." He forced Sumeragi to meet his eyes, felt goose bumps on the warm skin where his spirit fingers rested on it. Yet Sumeragi didn't shiver, didn't break away from his touch. "The goddess of creation approved of your choice, or neither he *nor you* would be here now."

"Then why are you still here?"

Breaking the contact with regret, Yue sat back on his heels and laughed. "Do you still want to exorcise me? I suggest you reconsider. The Sakura would not approve."

"I don't care about the Sakura's approval. I'm *supposed* to exorcise you. But I'm also supposed not to kill anybody, not to live with the Sakurazukamori, not to love—" he broke off, actually sipped from the coffee. "I don't do much of what I'm supposed to do these days. I'm not even sure I should." He put the cup down next to Yue's thigh on the kotatsu and nodded towards the now dark bedroom. "Why do you help him?" There was an unsaid '*Why do you help me?*', but Yue was sure Sumeragi wouldn't like the answer to that.

"Sei-chan's a special one," he said instead. Sumeragi coughed at the diminutive. "Few have affected the Sakura as much as he has. Fewer yet have changed the structures at the very core of what we are." He smiled wistfully, allowing his substance to become translucent as he continued. "I was forced to open a chasm between Amaterasu's children and the Sakura. He closed it." Yue allowed his spiritual essence to brush against Sumeragi's lips as he dissipated fully. "In a *most pleasurable* manner."

~::~::~~

Minato-ku, Tokyo  
Shibaura South Wharf  
Tokyu Shipping container yard  
07:48

The torn spirit exploded. Omi barely had time to dive behind one of the containers stored in this remote part of the shipyard. Dirty seawater splashed over the top of the container, soaking him. Debris cluttered against the metal. Had he been only a breath slower...

Omi cautiously came to his feet after the tempest had died down. His knees were weak. He'd probably sprained his left wrist. Propping himself against the rusty side of the container, he caught his breath. His coat stank of oil and sea waste, where the harbor water had hit him. His—

He shuddered, fumbled a dripping wet ofuda out of his pocket. Luckily, he'd used waterproof marker instead of traditional ink — Subaru-san's suggestion.

He pushed the thought about the break of tradition away, gripped the soaked ofuda more tightly and looked around the corner of the container. The small sea demon that had feasted upon the mutilated spirit left almost on the edge of the water was gone.

Omi slumped in relief.

## 18 — Lunar Eclipse

*He came in the small hours of the night. The almost-full moon high up in the sky drew the otherwise silent park in silver fog and shadows, erasing the difference between the world of the living and the world of the dead. And in spite of all efforts the Tree had made, its Sakurazukamori was still closer to the second than to the first. In the moon's pale light, he even looked as if he'd crossed the line for good. The silver-grey turtleneck and black pants protecting him from the chill only added to that impression.*

*He accepted the embrace of the branches willingly from the moment the eternal maboroshi closed around him, settling against the trunk. The Sakura felt his heart beating in perfect sync with the power pulsing through its veins.*

*Sei-chan was accommodating today. Very accommodating. Even the blossoms caressing his neck and cheek weren't brushed aside. Too accommodating. The Tree tipped his head back. ...What do you want?...*

*"The Sumeragi are being stubborn." He didn't blink in the intensified glow of its crown. "I need an authority of theirs to support the plans, or we'll never get the official changes passed."*

*...Su-chan won't do?...*

*The diminutive had him tense in its hold. Interesting.*

*"No," he said tersely. "We'll need Amaterasu's heir to change their minds."*

*The Tree stilled. ...He will demand compensation... The air in the spirit world filled with a whirl of torn blossoms and blood-tinged petals. ...There's nothing we can offer...*

*Seishiro straightened in its embrace, despite the bark rasping over his skin. "There is. And you have known it since Subaru-kun walked into my maboroshi all those years ago."*

*...Once you've regained your ch'i... the Sakura tightened its hold even before Sei-chan said it out loud:*

*"There's not enough time."*

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo,  
Kasumigaseki  
April 17, 2000 — 09:00

The morning rush hour was already abating by the time Subaru left the crowded Kasumigaseki subway station, heading towards the perfunctory white skyscraper down the street. Central Common Government Office Building no. 2 was a plain concrete block with twenty floors, housing several departments including his destination: the Ministry of Home Affairs.

The glass doors parted before him with a faint hiss. An inquiry with the receptionist made sure that he would be announced. "Please take elevator number three," she told him with a smile. "Minister Hori's anteroom has the number 11-02. Have a nice day."

Elevator three spat a group of grey-suited, briefcase-carrying officials into the lobby, and Subaru entered and pressed the button for the eleventh floor. Seishiro was reading a newspaper in the waiting lounge facing the elevators and Subaru met his eyes over the edge of the paper. They'd come separately; too much depended on this meeting. And on the next. The door closed between them, leaving him alone with their task.

The last time Subaru had contacted the ministry in person was after the loss of his eye, when Noda had still been in office. His successor, to whom Subaru presented his card now, turned out to be a man in his fifties wearing a crisp business suit and metal-rimmed glasses.

"I am honored that you would meet me at such short notice, Jichi-daijin<sup>53</sup>. Please accept my apology for inconveniencing you like this."

"It's not an inconvenience to meet the leading onmyoji of our country in person, Sumeragi-san. I've been looking forward to meeting you." Hori indicated one of the two armchairs in front of his desk. "Your work is of great importance to the country we serve." He placed the card next to his right hand on the writing pad. "How may I help you?"

An atypically fast opening. Subaru decided to be equally direct. "The spiritual situation has become increasingly complex since last year. The danger for the population and the personal risk for the practitioners

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53 Jichi-cho - Ministry of Home Affairs existed from July 1, 1960 to January 5, 2001 when it became a part of the newly formed Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. The Minister of Home Affairs (jichi-daijin) usually doubled as the chief of the National Public Safety Commission (NPSC).

involved have risen significantly, and erroneously assigned cases have become a considerable threat. We have to strengthen and streamline our responses to meet these challenges."

"I am aware of these unfortunate developments," Hori confirmed. "But I'm afraid I don't see how the Ministry of Home Affairs can help with that."

Subaru nodded. "Right now, critical time for preparations and precaution is lost when practitioners are assigned to cases not within their scope of experience," he explained. "Japan's spiritual defense is divided between my house and a group called Sakurazukamori—" Hori's eyes narrowed slightly at the name, but he signaled Subaru to continue. "—who are managed by a different department. This arrangement weakens us significantly." He drew a deep breath, calming himself before he continued. "In order to maintain Japan's spiritual safety, the Sakurazukamori and I have to join forces. Incoming cases have to be assessed by practitioners who can make educated decisions about who is best suited to do the job." Subaru sat back, inwardly praying that Hori didn't take offense. Non-practitioners like him often saw their work solely in terms of qualifications and if the minister took his words as criticism of his performance—

"Sumeragi-san," Hori said cautiously. "I see the tactical advantage of your proposal, but it is a lot more difficult than you may be aware of. Such a collaboration is without precedence."

"Please excuse my bluntness, Jichi-daijin, but I beg to differ," Subaru said with a bow of respect. "Before the Meiji era, there was a special government office held by onmyoji, solely responsible for the country's spiritual safety. The Onmyo-ryo's alignment with the Ministry of State dates back even to pre-Heian times. Its reconstitution as a coordination office for the Sakurazukamori and my people would be a good solution to the current situation."

The minister considered him. Subaru only hoped he also considered his idea. Even as a sub-department, they'd need his approval, and even more they would need his support for their plans in the Diet, or—

"Allow me to be equally blunt," Hori said finally. "Do you know with whom you would have to work if your suggestion is approved? What kind of man you would have to face on a daily basis then?"

"Yes, Jichi-daijin." Subaru inclined his head politely, relief warring with amusement. "I am aware that the Sakurazukamori can be a taxing character occasionally, but I don't think there's anything that can't be overcome."

The minister looked at him incredulously.

*Taxing* was one way to put it. Subaru suppressed a smile. Maybe he should consider getting a *tax return*. He squelched that frivolous thought, when Hori cleared his throat. "It will be extremely difficult to convince the Sakurazukamori to limit his personal influence by sharing responsibility in the manner you propose," he stated with obvious unease, "but I will try to discuss your proposal with him at the next scheduled meeting."

"Why don't we ask him now?" Subaru suggested with a small smile. "He's waiting downstairs."

"He's *waiting*?" Hori looked stunned.

Subaru nodded.

The minister pressed a button in the intercom. "Sumida, I've been told Sakurazuka-san is in the lobby. Please ask the receptionist to send him to my office."

=Jichi-daijin.= The secretary sounded nervous. =Sakurazuka-san is here right now.=

"Then send him in, please." Hori closed the line.

"Thank you, Sumida-san," Seishiro's voice came through the opening door. "Your coffee was delicious as always, but there's no need for another cup. This won't take long."

"Weren't you going to wait for me downstairs?" Subaru asked.

"Yes, but Sumida-san's coffee is a lot better than what you get in the lobby." Seishiro smiled, taking a seat in the second armchair and nodded at the minister. "Hello, Ko-kun. Let's keep this short: I know about Subaru-kun's proposal, it's fine by me, and I suggest you take this meeting as minister of Home Affairs *and* chairman of the National Public Safety Commission, because I lack the time to have this discussion twice."

*Ko-kun*? Subaru threw a wary glance at Seishiro. Seishiro was on private terms with—?

"I see," Hori said stiffly, glancing doubtfully at Subaru and back to Seishiro. "You truly agree to a collaboration with the Sumeragi?"

"Who would refuse to work with such a beautiful colleague?" Seishiro asked, arching a brow, and Subaru fought the urge to kick his shin. "Besides, Subaru-kun's proposition will certainly spare my secretary from calling the Sumeragi under an assumed name to reroute those cases that should have gone to them in the first place. Two very strong selling points in my books."

"You are supposed to return cases through official channels!" the minister reminded him sharply.

"Which takes half a year. By then, they've become my responsibility, and I'm held accountable if the Sumeragi don't notice that in time." Seishiro shrugged. "I'm sorry, but that's just too tedious."

Subaru gave him a warning look, silently reminding him that they still needed Hori's support for their plans. Certainly—

The minister snorted. "And why do you think I'd reduce government control over an ethically critical operation such as yours?"

"Because it virtually eliminates the problem of assignment errors that put the lives of innocent civilians and valuable Sumeragi practitioners at risk?" Seishiro suggested. Leaning forward, he rested his elbows on the desk and added in a soft voice through his steepened fingers, "And it saves *you* from any personal responsibility for the next *Sawada*."

Subaru suppressed a sigh. A threat was not likely to get them Hori's support. "You wouldn't relinquish government control, Jichi-daijin," he said calmly, laying a hand on Seishiro's sleeve to keep him from interrupting. "In fact you will gain control, because you still supervise all cases handed to the Onmyo-ryo and you can be sure that my people will do their utmost to clear the cases that don't require the Sakurazukamori's service."

"You didn't have to threaten him," Subaru bit out ten minutes later after the doors of the elevator had closed behind them. "We need his intercession in parliament."

"I didn't." Seishiro corrected. "I merely reminded him of the downsides his position has for a non-practitioner. Rest assured, he'll use all powers of persuasion to get this through."

"Downsides like being involved in killing colleagues?" Subaru asked acidly.

"Downsides like having to deal with me complaining about him wasting my time."

"Downsides like you filing cases with us under false names."

Seishiro arched a brow at him. "I always found your practice of working for unverified customers exceedingly risky."

"I'm tempted to file an anonymous one myself," Subaru muttered angrily.

"That would be number ten, I think." Seishiro chuckled. "Or is it the eleventh? And why would my sweet Subaru-kun wish to see me dead just after preventing that?"

"Because I'm sick of you embarrassing me in public?" Subaru suggested. "It might have been funny at sixteen, but it's downright annoying at twenty-six."

With a ding the elevator opened into the lobby.

Outside, Seishiro nodded toward the end of the street and the tall stone structure visible beyond. "We've been told to use the Kitahanebashi gate, not the Sakurada."

"Being called in from the north-east..." Subaru sighed, frustrated. "The least auspicious direction."

"It's also the easiest entrance if one wants to avoid press and IHA alike." Seishiro started down the street towards the MPD and the pedestrian crossing. "Come. The car's in my lot."

"You parked *there*?" Subaru asked, disbelieving.

"Sure." Seishiro shrugged. "This is Kasumigaseki. I'd be a fool to surrender a reserved parking lot in front of my office."

The sickening scent of azaleas in full bloom wafting up from the flower beds closed around them. Faded yellow paint lines on the concrete still marked the spots where the blood had been. Subaru suppressed a shudder, when Seishiro carelessly walked across them to unlock the driver's door. "How can you—?" He broke off, shaking his head. "You nearly died here."

"You're endearing, Subaru-kun." Seishiro smiled sweetly. "But in my business, 'nearly' is not nearly enough."

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
Kokyo

Seishiro parked the Aristo near the Imperial Science museum and unlocked the trunk to retrieve a silk-wrapped bundle longer than his arm before locking the car.

"What's that?" Subaru asked, surprised.

"My key." Seishiro carried it in the crook of his arm as they headed towards the pedestrian bridge to the Kitahanebashi gate. "I know it's a tad unwieldy, but then, the Kokyo is big, too."

Subaru threw him a long look as they crossed the shadow of the gate and entered the Gardens. "I hope you're going to show more restraint here than with the jichi-daijin," he said evenly as they followed the moat.

"Don't worry." Seishiro gripped his bundle tighter. "This is very serious business for me, too." They were heading towards a narrow dam bridging the inner moat that separated the public East Gardens from the forbidden Kokyo. Large, polished stonewalls topped by a single line of trees and grass rose nearly ten meters out of the muddy waters. A tall steel fence with a padlocked gate and "no trespassing" signs blocked access to a drawbridge that made up the first five meters of the crossing. Tall shrubs and small trees hid the place from the park.

"I guess your key doesn't work on this," Subaru commented as he laid his hand against the steel.

Seishiro shrugged and pushed against the bars, revealing the gate to be unlocked. "It doesn't have to."

The Kokyo's strong wards and protective kekkai, made and maintained by Amaterasu's closest living descendant on Earth, wrapped warm around them as they reached the actual dam. For the duration of a

step, Seishiro's marks on Subaru's hands flared painfully hot. Still, Seishiro, with the long bundle safe in his arms, seemed unperturbed. *Key indeed*, Subaru thought, hiding his frown.

On the other side, old pines closed around them. Their smell mingled with the scent of fresh green and crushed rotten leaves from previous years. Tokyo seemed to be a distant memory by the time a small, wooden guest house appeared in front of them. It was a traditional structure with a polished floor. Some of the shoji between the dark rosewood beams supporting a wide roof were pushed back. Silk veils hung from the ceiling, shielding the room from insects and eyes.

Seishiro ducked through the veils without hesitation. Subaru followed. A man in a plain, powder-blue kimono sat beside a central fire place, waiting for them. The upper half of his face was obscured by a gauze veil hanging from a wide straw hat. An iron tea set — kettle and cups — stood on a polished wood tray between him and two laid-out sitting cushions. Water simmered in another kettle above the fire.

Fire and water. Not yin and not yang. Both, Subaru noted. And nothing, like the unbleached silk of the cushions; something that would be defined entirely by the people using it.

"There are no living names within this room," their host stated quietly. "So that we all can deny this meeting." He turned towards Seishiro. "Identify yourself." The words were as quiet as before, still the voice of an old man, and it held an authority Subaru had seldom heard before.

Seishiro wordlessly unbound his silk bundle. His 'key' turned out to be a sheathed sword Subaru had seen only two days before — as a spirit blade laid against his throat. But this jian was undoubtedly real; even after fourteen hundred years its ancient steel gleamed cold in the warm firelight.

"I never thought to see the 'sword in the shadows' with my own eyes," their half-veiled host said. "Aren't you afraid to let me see your face, Sakurazukamori?"

"Are you seeing my face or my illusion of it?" Seishiro asked with a raised brow and sat down on the left cushion, placing the jian respectfully on his right. A sheathed sword intended to be used would be placed near the left. "The weapon of truth is deceit." And caution.

"Indeed." Their host nodded; then his focus found Subaru. "Have a seat, Sword-in-the-light. You and I have met before. It is good to see you again in good health." He stoked the fire and flames danced up towards the copper flue, leaving Subaru to claim the remaining cushion to Seishiro's right. The ancient jian, called the 'sword in the shadows', lay between them, symbolizing the border that kept them apart. The old man offered the first cup of his tea to Seishiro. "I always wondered who asked your family to be the judge of the emperor."

Subaru froze, while Seishiro took the sword, turned his wrist sharply and presented a crest engraved on the hilt next to a stylized sakura blossom. "Empress Suiko. She didn't want Amaterasu's heirs to become what they fought."

"Yes," their host nodded. "That's something she would have done."

Seishiro laid the sword down again and took the proffered cup with a respectful bow.

The second cup was offered to Subaru, who accepted it with long-practiced ease despite shaking hands, thankful for his grandmother's insistence on perfection in the ritual. Otherwise he'd have spilled most of the tea over his pants right now. *The judge of the emperor*. He was going to have a talk with Seishiro regarding secrets affecting their plans.

"I assume your request has something to do with the miasma that clouded the spirit world four days ago," their host said after they'd both had their ritual sip.

Seishiro put his cup down. "Let us say that last Thursday's events were a powerful reminder that the current system is a hindrance at best and a cause for disaster at worst."

"I see," the tea master nodded thoughtfully. "Can you elaborate on the events?"

"Only in so far as that I do not wish to repeat the experience."

"Is that your position as well, Sword-in-the-light?"

"Yes," Subaru confirmed. "It is unacceptable that a loyal servant of the country should go without the spiritual protection his position demands."

"I do believe that the Sword-in-the-shadows can look after himself." A small smile tugged at the lips just visible beneath their host's veil.

"I am aware of that," Subaru said, struggling to keep his speech even. "But it is my family's pride to have provided this protection since the dawn of the state. In his case, we have failed. It is my wish to correct that."

"Your wish? Or your clan's wish?"

"My wish. The Sakurazukamori and I are opposites, but we aren't meant to be opponents. Since the end of last year, the Dao has taken hold. In this new world, we need to work with instead of against each other. Unfortunately, my clan doesn't see the wisdom behind our plans yet."

"And yours, Sword-in-the-shadows?"

"My methods of convincing are less consensual in nature," Seishiro replied dryly. "An advantage in this case."

"Indeed." Their host nodded. "I assume the Sword-in-the-light objects to subjecting his clan to your style of convincing?"

"Not if the feud is to remain ended," Subaru said firmly.

"Indeed, indeed." The old man chuckled. A breeze moved the veils between the rosewood pillars. The heavy scent of wet earth and pines mingled with the leafy aroma of the tea in their cups and the sting of the glowing coals in the stove. "The Sword-in-the-light is Amaterasu's disciple and may ask a favor, but why should I hear you, Sword-in-the-shadows?"

"Because I offer the elimination of a threat to Imperial lives in exchange for your support," Seishiro stated as if he'd expected the demand. "A threat which my house has struggled to contain since before Empress Suiko ascended the throne."

Subaru tensed. Certainly, Seishiro wouldn't risk facing—

Their host nodded. "An impressive offer, but I was told this particular threat would be impossible to destroy."

Especially after the loss of almost all of his ch'i—

"For one of us alone, yes," Seishiro confirmed. "Together, we may prevail."

—and certainly all of his mind! Subaru struggled not to do the inconceivable: interrupt Amaterasu's Heir to tell Seishiro that he was completely insane to think of going anywhere near that ghost this summer.

"May?"

"I cannot promise certainty where there is none. During the next full moon, we will require unlimited access to the East Gardens, the place where the spirit last manifested within contemporary Tokyo."

"The next full moon is tomorrow night," their host pointed out. "Can you meet that?"

*No!* Subaru snapped inwardly.

"Yes," Seishiro confirmed quietly.

It was madness. Suicidal madness. He had to make sure Seishiro's insanity didn't have lasting repercussions for the state. "I humbly suggest that the Imperial family leaves Tokyo while we perform the ceremony." Subaru forced his hands to remain still on his knees. "For safety in case of failure. Kyoto's wards are well-maintained. My family would be honored to be of service."

"I'm sure they will." Their host faced him. "And it will conveniently demonstrate Imperial support for your plans, Sword-in-the-light. I see you gave this plan of yours a lot of consideration."

Five seconds of consideration. Seishiro had a *lot* to learn about the meaning of 'collaboration'. If they survived Tuesday night, that was. If Subaru wanted to strangle him. And felt shamed by the impulse in the presence of Amaterasu's Heir, who was politely inclining his head, asking, "Before I decide this, Sword-in-the-shadows, tell me how often your blade touched Imperial skin."

"Twice," Seishiro replied. "But it didn't have to cut through."

"May I ask whose skin it was?"

"That remains between the Sword and the Emperor in question."

Their host took up his cup, nipped at the tea, then: "A hypothetical question. Would you have killed Meiji or Showa in order to stop Japan's descent into war?"

The silence was absolute until Seishiro said, "I can answer that, but the weapon of truth—"

"—is deceit." The old man put his cup down with a sigh and straightened. "The Kokyo Gaien will be closed tonight and sealed for tomorrow. None of the Imperial family will remain in Tokyo tomorrow night. Go now, Swords-of-shadow-and-light. Act wisely. You have only one try." A brief nod dismissed them. "And Sakurazukamori-san." They were stopped when Seishiro was about to pass through the veils. "My honored ancestor asked much of your family."

Stillness. Then a quiet nod.

"She chose well."

Seishiro actually bowed over the sheathed sword before he left the guest house.

They returned the way they had come. Subaru remained silent while they crossed the dam back to the public area.

"Distraction spell," Seishiro said quietly as they left the park through the Kitahanebashi gate a few minutes later.

"Please?"

"The reason why those tourists didn't see us on the dam. Don't tell me you didn't worry about them."

Subaru hadn't even seen them. He'd been too busy keeping himself from wrapping his hands around Seishiro's neck and strangling him. "I assume you left your brain in the car," he said, clipped, as they crossed the pedestrian bridge back to the parking lot.

"Not that I know of," Seishiro replied, seemingly amused. "Distraction spells are a lot easier than *illu*—"

"We were offered a *month* for preparation! More, if required! He'd have *waited* for us to be ready, and you—" He closed his mouth over the profanity on his tongue.

"He would. The Mori wouldn't." Seishiro shrugged. "We've fought the Emperor's Murderer before. Without prior notice and with you unused to shielding against your own magic. We'll just—"

"There won't be a 'we'!" Subaru snapped. "I will not have someone with reduced ch'i within the circle. For sure not someone who'll draw the spirit's wrath *rightfully!* That spirit would have you for breakfast!"

"You're exaggerating. Getting a bridge into my back wasn't good for my ch'i, either, and we managed." Seishiro fished the car keys out of his pants pockets as they reached the parking lot. "I don't see—"

"That's right," Subaru cut him off. "You don't see. You said it yourself: you're no exorcist! Believe me, with that *you're right!*" He opened the passenger door of the Aristo with a sharp jerk. "And now get us back to Sakuragi! I've got less than two days to figure out how to get us out of this mess you got us in!" He sat down and closed the passenger door with a reverberating bang. Seishiro, about to get behind the steering wheel, winced — likely about his precious car — but he didn't remind him about the seatbelt.

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
2 hours later

Subaru watched Seishiro sleep. Standing in the bedroom doorway, his shoulder propped against the doorframe, he followed the soft lift and fall of the glossy black cover caused by Seishiro's even breathing. He did that a lot these days, and he was secretly glad that he could, despite his current anger about Seishiro's idiocy. Or thoughtlessness. Or anything in between.

A collaboration meant working *together*.

He hadn't argued in the car — no reason to risk a traffic accident on the expressway —, but he'd made himself clear after they got home and Seishiro hadn't said much in his defense. Which meant either he knew he'd messed up or he didn't care.

Subaru silently balled his fist. "We may prevail," Seishiro had said. *May*. 'May' wasn't enough. They couldn't risk going blind into a confrontation like this. But whom could he ask about somebody who wasn't even mentioned in the chronicles of his own clan? Except...

Subaru pushed himself off the doorframe. He fetched his writing materials and a sheet of the white washi that Seishiro had bought before the Diet case, and sat down at the unheated kotatsu. Uchiyama washi was associated with winter and Amaterasu's brother Tsukiyomi, god of the moon. A fitting material for this purpose. He stirred the ink, making sure the pigment was distributed evenly in the sacred oil, and thought of the layout for this specific ofuda. He had to deal with opposites here: the living and the dead, sun and moon, Sumeragi and Sakurazuka. The Mantra of Green Tara was designed to overcome duality. It would go on the front. Subaru drew it with decisive brush strokes, then waited for the ink to dry.

It was just past midday and the sun was high up in the sky. To balance that he added the character for moon on the back, thus also personalizing the ofuda to the spirit he intended to call. He checked the washi for ink bleeding through and found his work sound. Satisfied, he capped the ink and left the house.

In the shade of the ancient ginkgo in Seishiro's yard, Subaru knelt down among the ferns he'd planted. His hands felt cold, as if the paper of the ofuda was made of snow and not just bleached with it.

ooo Om Tare Tutare Ture Soha ooo<sup>54</sup>

He waited. A light breeze moved the fan-shaped leaves of the tree above him. Nothing.

ooo Om Tare Tutare Ture Soha ooo

ooo Om Tare Tutare Ture Soha ooo

ooo Om Tare Tu— ooo

"You don't have to shout, Second-source-of-the-Dao," the first Sakurazukamori said behind him. "I am dead, not deaf." The ancient spirit sat on the roots of the ginkgo, tugging his earlobe as if to stop his ears from ringing. "I see you're already making good use of your garden—"

"I don't have a garden," Subaru protested. "I merely planted some ferns!"

"Your ferns may have a different opinion, but I concede that to some extent it may be a matter of perspective." Yue shrugged daintily, resting his chin in his hand. "I assume you didn't call me for gardening tips?"

"I need information about the Emperor's Murderer."

The request changed the spirit's demeanor dramatically. All roguish mischief was gone from the silver eyes; a grey clad foot, solid enough to make an audible thump, hit the ground. "Leave it be." Yue stood. "You shouldn't ask *me* about *him*."

"You're the only one I can ask," Subaru insisted. "Seishiro offered his removal from the realm in exchange for the Tenno's support."

"When?" The word was a single breath of air.

"Tomorrow night. I—"

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54 Om Tare Tutare Ture Soha. Mantra of Tibetan Buddhism.

The ginkgo's branches overhead whipped in a storm that didn't reach Subaru's skin. Ferns rustled around entirely solid legs as the spirit pressed forward, growling something that sounded like 'foolish child in need of spanking'.

Subaru blocked the first Sakurazukamori's path to the house. "If the situation weren't as critical as it is, I'd hold him down for you to spank, but there's no time. We both know it's too early. I cannot allow him into the circle." That got him the spirits' attention again. "I need a better idea of what I'm going to face," he argued. "You fought him. You must know what happened and who he was."

Yue stilled. "Come here," he said.

"I'm not in the mood for games," Subaru warned, eliciting a wry smile from the ghost.

"You learned well, but I'm not going to shout this across your ferns. Sit beside me and listen or go into your fight unprepared. The Sakura is fond of Seishiro; I'm not." He returned to the ginkgo and sat on its tallest root, back comfortably rested against its trunk.

Subaru gave in.

"He was a commoner going by the name of Sado<sup>55</sup>," Yue said after he'd sat down. "Though I don't know if he really came from that island. He was a hedge-wizard with an exceptionally strong gift, as strong as yours, but he wasn't trained, otherwise he would have been an outstanding practitioner."

"If he wasn't trained, what techniques did he use?"

Yue shrugged. "The basics, mostly. What you can learn by observing nature and the few rituals performed in those days." He inclined his head, thinking. "The yin-yang principle was known to him, also some — if not all — of the five elements. Nothing of the I-Ging, of that I'm sure. He's been imprisoned since before the time of Empress Suiko—"

There was a small dissonance in the words at the name, but Subaru decided to say nothing. There were stories better left untold at the moment.

"Sei-chan's runes block him completely, but I don't know what Sado learned in his captivity before that. Not being in the flesh might have slowed him down, but as you can see..." Yue smiled, creating a glowing sakura petal with his fingertip to blow it at Subaru. "It's not truly a hindrance."

Subaru frowned. "Who was he as a person?"

"He was as fierce as he was physically beautiful. Smart, ambitious, and totally unscrupulous."

"You describe the virtues of a good Sakurazukamori," Subaru said dryly.

A wicked laugh erupted from the spirit. "I desired his body. I abhorred his soul." Leaning forward, he trailed a cold fingertip down Subaru's cheek. "I did well separating them. You fit this body much better than he."

Subaru brushed the intruding hand aside, but for once the fingers weren't solid enough to be grasped. "Stop that!" he growled and Yue settled back against the trunk, laughing silently. "What happened back then?"

The laughing stopped. "He killed Sushun-tenno to convince Shotoku-taishi of his gifts of prophecy. Then he used Sushun's corpse to put the blame on the powerful Soga clan, who opposed his 'client'—" Yue raised his brows at the word. "—Shotoku in court."

"Are you implying that—" Subaru frowned.

"I am implying nothing." Yue snorted. "I did not care for Sushun-tenno — he was a violent and volatile man, if there ever was one — but I couldn't let Sado's plan to ruin the Soga bear fruits. I was a recent immigrant. Losing the protection of the Soga clan would have been fatal for me."

"What did you do?"

Yue sighed. "I disembodied him, but I couldn't move him on, or seal his magic so that the Tree might process the spiritual essence without getting burned."

"So you put his spirit into a box and continued with your life," Subaru concluded.

"A cave," Yue corrected, "but basically, yes." He sighed again. "His spirit was the responsibility I most regretted passing on."

Subaru remained silent for a long time. Wind moved the fire-scarred branches of the old ginkgo above them, creating an ever-changing pattern of shadows and sunlight. Sunlight and shadows. "I will try to move him on," he said finally, "but just in case..." He kept his eyes on the delicate fronds of the ferns, moving gracefully in the breeze as if bowing assent to his decision. "What do I have to do to bind him to the Sakura?"

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55 Sado. In ancient and pre-ancient Japan, commoners were identified solely by their given name, often identical with the place they came from. Sado (Sadogashima) is a large island, about 50 kilometers off the coast of Niigata, already mentioned as populated in 544 in the Nihonshoki. There's a special breeding program for Toki (Japanese Crested Ibis) there today.



Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
Kokyo East Gardens  
April 18, 2000 — late afternoon

The local headline of Asahi Shimbun's morning edition read "Kokyo East Gardens closed for inventory and botanical pest control". The same message was displayed on noticeboards in the nearby subway stations. "Pest control," Seishiro chuckled at the extra-large sign in front of the pedestrian crossing towards the East Gardens' Otemon gate. "I guess that's one way to put it."

"It's a tourist attraction." Subaru shrugged and pushed the shoulder strap of his satchel into a more comfortable position. "They had to give a reason for cordoning it off."

"Pest control." Seishiro repeated, still amused "I guess your family isn't too happy to be aligned with 'Roaches 'R' Us'."

Subaru contemplated the sign as they passed it. "I think they'd object more to 'Ghostbusters'," he concluded. "At any rate, since it's an Imperial decree they'll suffer in silence."

"Splendid! Did they send observers?"

Subaru nodded. "Elder Makoto will witness for the council." He glanced at Seishiro. "Will your people be around?"

Seishiro's expression closed. "I made sure they won't bother us tonight. Tomorrow's another matter though. The... party in question will want to know what happened, preferably prior informing the rest." He took his passport from the chest pocket of his jacket as they approached the closed gate with a stern looking officer of the Imperial Guard serving as additional deterrent for nosy passers-by.

"This area is closed to the public," the officer stated briskly. "Please return the day after tomorrow."

"Sakurazuka and Sumeragi." Seishiro opened his passport. "We're the bug busters."

Subaru rolled his eyes and produced his own ID. "We are expected to work in the Gardens tonight, officer. You should have our names on the list."

A second officer stepped out of the gate and examined their passports thoroughly before, apparently satisfied, he handed them back and nodded for the gate to be opened. "My name's Kisaraki," he introduced himself with a polite bow. "If you would follow me now. Chief superintendent Shiibatani awaits you."

The chief superintendent's office lay on the first floor of the Imperial Guard headquarters not far from the Otemon gate. Their guide knocked briskly on the dark wood door before disappearing behind it. "Chief superintendent. The onmyoji are here now."

"Send them in, please," a strong voice said and the door was opened wide, their guide bowing again and closing it silently behind them.

"Good afternoon, Sumeragi-san." The man in the blue-grey courtesy uniform of the Imperial Guard was young for his position. "Sakurazuka-san. Nice to see you using the gate for a change."

Seishiro shrugged. "The helicopter wasn't available."

Shiibatani indicated the leather chairs in front of his desk. "Please have a seat. I'd like to get a good idea what to expect tonight. The Guard is ordered to assist you to the best of our ability, but for that we need information." With a glance at Seishiro, he added, "As far as it can be given, of course. In addition..." Shiibatani rested his elbows on his desk pad and folded his hands. "Sumeragi-san, you see me confused. Until now, we had orders to do our utmost to keep you and Sakurazuka-san separated when you were on Imperial ground, and now you two are apparently planning a major joint operation on Imperial property. May I ask how that came to pass?"

Subaru frowned. "I didn't know about such an order being given." He glanced at Seishiro. "You?"

"I'm afraid not, though I have a pretty good idea who was behind it."

"My grandmother can be overprotective," Subaru explained to the chief superintendent, pointedly ignoring Seishiro's snort at the word 'overprotective'. "Speaking of my grandmother, I ordered equipment for the exorcism to be sent from Kyoto. Do you know if it has arrived by now?"

"Two members of your clan arrived an hour ago, Sumeragi-san," Shiibatani replied. "They were given guest rooms. One of them asked permission for a wakizashi within the park. I assume that's the item you requested."

"A wakizashi?" Seishiro inquired warily.

"Yes." Subaru said, to both of them, then added for Seishiro, "The personal blade of Sumeragi Susumu, last used after the battle of Sekigahara." In fact, Susumu had slit open his belly in ritual suicide, but Subaru hoped that Seishiro didn't know that much about his clan's history. Still... he would know about the significance of a bloodied wakizashi, even though he wasn't aware of the spell embedded in its steel. *We're both too used to working alone*, he realized. It should have occurred to him to tell Seishiro about the sword earlier.

"Do you want a guard to protect you and the historical sword tonight?" Shiibatani asked and Subaru caught himself.

"No, chief superintendent. In fact, I want nobody but us—" He indicated Seishiro and himself. "—and the representatives of my clan within the park before sunrise. You wouldn't be protecting us, but putting us in danger by providing possible vessels for the spirit we are going to exorcise."

"Guard the gates and the prohibited area of the Kokyo from the other side of the moats," Seishiro suggested at Shiibatani's obvious unease. "They are built to protect, thus they are strong natural wards."

Shiibatani nodded and made a swift note.

"I need to confer with the representatives of my clan as soon as possible," Subaru continued. "And we require a quiet room and a washing facility for purification."

"You may use the facilities at the Saineikan<sup>56</sup>. Your relatives are already waiting there," Shiibatani answered. "Kisaraki will show you the way."

"Thank you." Subaru inclined his head. "That will be very helpful."

"Do you need anything else?"

"Yes." Seishiro took over. "Five military grade glowsticks with steel anchors and maximum glow duration."

"Glowsticks?" Subaru asked.

"Yes." Seishiro nodded. "Preferable to torches. They are a lot harder to extinguish and if the casings are broken, the luminescent chemical spreads and thickens the barrier instead of thinning it."

"But will the glow last long enough?"

"The strong ones last up to five days, Sumeragi-san," the chief superintendent told him. "Though the SDF objects to handing out expensive consumables to non-military personnel." The latter was directed at Seishiro, who shrugged.

"Put me on the phone, if they cause you trouble."

"Rest assured, I will," Shiibatani returned dryly. "Anything else?"

"The attendance of at least two gardeners with a sod-cutter and compactor would be very much appreciated."

For the first time, the chief superintendent seemed surprised. "Excuse me?"

"You don't expect me to do the digging myself, do you?" Seishiro asked.

Shiibatani just shook his head. "I'll have a group of technicians and gardeners ready to assist you in thirty minutes. Please keep the damage to Imperial property to a minimum."

"Rest assured, I will," Seishiro answered mockingly.

Subaru's heel dug firmly into Seishiro's right shoe. "Chief superintendent. Please accept my apology for the trouble we are causing. We're very grateful for your help and would not want to occupy more of your time than necessary. If you would send for our guide now, we'll be on our way immediately."

Kisaraki was already awaiting them in the corridor. "If I may precede you." He bowed briefly and led the way in a brisk pace.

Outside, Subaru slowed and touched Seishiro's sleeve, signaling him to also fall behind. "I won't ask about the reason for a sod-cutter," he said in a low voice, "unless I should worry about my feet or the hem of the shikifuku during the exorcism."

"You don't have to." Seishiro chuckled at the image. "Trust me."

"Yes. And you can trust *me* about the wakizashi," Subaru said. He didn't want to do this. Not here, not now. But he had to do better than Seishiro if he wanted this collaboration to work. A lot better. "Whatever is going to happen, trust me that I won't kill myself." He stopped them, raised his hand for Seishiro to see the pentagram scar on its back. "You own my death. I recognize the claim." He searched Seishiro's eyes, tried to make him understand. "And I expect you to recognize mine." He reached for Seishiro's hand, brushed bare fingertips across the pale pentacle scar there.

"You claim my death?" Seishiro asked with a raised brow. "Why, I'm touched—"

"I claim your *life*," Subaru corrected.

Seishiro's eyes widened at the emphasis, as if... rattled?

"Sumeragi-san? Sakurazuka-san?" Kisaraki cleared his throat nervously. "If you would follow me? The Saineikan is not far now."

"Of course," Seishiro said smoothly, the mask back on his face. "Please excuse our slowness."

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<sup>56</sup> Saineikan is the dojo of the Imperial Guards on the grounds of the Kokyo East Gardens. Because I couldn't find any specific information about the Saineikan, Dave Lowry's article *What puts the "Tao" in the dojo?* was my main source for it. It gives a very interesting view of the deeper meaning of dojo layout with respect to the Dao and the theory of five elements: [part 1](http://www.fightingarts.com/reading/article.php?id=386): <http://www.fightingarts.com/reading/article.php?id=386> and [part 2](http://www.fightingarts.com/reading/article.php?id=387): <http://www.fightingarts.com/reading/article.php?id=387>

Saineikan

"Subaru-san." Elder Makoto stood and bowed at him when he entered the room. She hesitated a second, then bowed equally deeply at Seishiro following him. "Sakurazuka-san."

Politeness, Subaru noted. With the end of the feud, Seishiro — whatever they thought of him and his house — was the head of another clan deserving respect.

"May I introduce Shiro Ameru to you? He took it upon his karma to transport the item you requested, Subaru-san." Makoto indicated a slender man in his fifties, waiting patiently a few steps behind her. He also bowed in respect. "Sakurazuka-san—"

"It isn't necessary to introduce us, Makoto-san," Seishiro said with a smile. "Shiro-san and I already had the good fortune to meet."

Shiro shot him a warning glare.

"May I ask how that came to pass?" Subaru inquired warily.

"We share an interest in geckos." Seishiro smirked.

"With the utmost respect, Sakurazuka-san," elder Makoto said, "may I request that you leave, while we help Subaru-san prepare for this exorcism? From what I was told, the spirit in question is highly volatile and may gain a hold on Subaru-san's body if he goes unprotected."

"Elder Makoto," Subaru protested, "I do know how to shield myself."

"Yet you asked for Susumu's blade," Makoto replied sternly. "Do believe me that I know what that means. Ameru-kun is a specialist in protective spells. Please allow us to help you."

"Yet it is not your place to ask my partner to leave," Subaru stated firmly.

"I am aware of that," the old woman returned. "And I mean no disrespect." She bowed again to Seishiro. "But I cannot help being disquieted by his presence and I do not wish to make mistakes regarding your safety. Please—"

"Let it be," Seishiro acceded unexpectedly. "I've got to set up the banning field anyway." He glanced at his watch. "The gardeners should have arrived by now." He gave a mocking nod at Ameru and the discomfited elder. "Be seeing you."

Elder Makoto clapped her hands the moment the door closed behind him. "Let us not waste time. Given the situation, purification will take a while. Please remove your clothes so that we may begin."

Fifteen minutes later, the pungent scent of skin ink prepared from auspicious oil filled the air. A fine rice straw brush scratched over Subaru's skin, writing protective spells down his back in swift, sure strokes, forming twin lines left and right of his spine. Twins...

*"...there are peculiarities regarding twins in our line that allowed us not to burden you with the task of preserving the exceptional gift of your line..."* his grandmother had told him after his sister's funeral.

Twins were rare. The last time twins like he and Hokuto were born to the Sumeragi had been twenty years before the rise of the Tokugawa. Sixteen-year-old Sumeragi Susumu had spent three months at the sickbed of Toyotomi Hideyoshi. When Hideyoshi died in 1598, Susumu had staunchly supported the Toyotomi, thereby alienating Tokugawa Ieyasu, a man famous for remembering insults. When the Tokugawa rose to power, Susumu had cast a spell on his blade and ended his life, allowing the Sumeragi to continue as a renewed house with his twin sister's son as the new head. Subaru was that son's twelfth successor, and if they failed today, the last. Susumu's wakizashi waited for him on a cushion of white silk, stitched with red pentacles.

The brush stopped at his right arm. "What caused this scar?" Ameru, kneeling beside him, asked. "I need to know whether special shielding would be prudent or not."

"There's a titanium strut supporting the bone. The Sakurazukamori broke my arm in 1991."

Ameru frowned. "Was he the same man who holds the position now?"

"Yes. He also broke my ribs."

Ameru lowered his head, dipping the brush back into the ink.

*...and killed my sister,* Subaru added in his thoughts. When gendermixed twins were born into the Sumeragi, the male had always died young with the female continuing the line...

...until Hokuto had offered herself to the Sakurazukamori in his stead. And now he was preparing for spiritual war, with Seishiro's words on his mind:

*"I'd ask myself why my magically inept sister had to ask my arch-enemy to spill her blood for her magic to work."*

"Raise your arms, Subaru-sama," Ameru's quiet voice told him and the drawing of spells continued around his hips.

The floodlights mounted on tall masts along the paved walkway bathed the wide lawn in front of the Tenshukakuaku in brilliant white light. Subaru felt their heat through his shikifuku, causing the auspicious ink on his skin to itch the moment he got out of the car. Behind him, chief superintendent Shiibatani turned the car back towards the administration area and the Otemon gate beyond. Until the sun rose, he and his people would remain outside the park, awaiting Subaru's clearance to return.

Seishiro's prepared banning circle lay conspicuously in the middle of the lawn. The glowsticks marking it were half a meter high and Subaru knew, they reached equally deep. His zori sank into the wet grass as he left the paved area. His white tabi were smeared with green by the time he reached the bare ground between the glowsticks. Seishiro had insisted on having the grass removed. The Imperial gardeners had dug it out carefully, placing the sods aside to put them back afterwards; then the bare earth had been tamped down. Seishiro would have had the place concreted, had there been the time for it.

Subaru wondered if his grandmother would see the connection between a bald spot in the emperor's garden and the time she had used grass blades against Seishiro.

Probably not. But the Sakurazukamori wouldn't forget that grass had served the Sumeragi as armament once, thus he had it removed.

On the bare earth inside, blood-written black ofuda, laminated to avoid decay, were pinned to the ground with narrow black daggers in a second circle. The power pulsed within these circles even before they'd been invoked. A faint scent of sakura mingled with the smell of raw earth. Seishiro had drawn a lot of power from the Tree. Ultimately, this banning field would be paid for in blood. In lives. Lives to replenish the power the Tree provided for it...

...and the longer they took, the more expensive it got.

...are you less of a murderer because you didn't know?...

...are you less of a murderer because you are Sumeragi?...

Subaru was no longer ignorant and whether or not he was still Sumeragi would depend a lot on what happened tonight.

He looked towards the fire-lit top of the Tenshukakuaku. Elder Makoto was sitting on a backless chair. Ameru was standing behind her. Their vigil in full vestments reminded him that he wasn't trustworthy in the eyes of his clan anymore.

His grandmother had remained in Kyoto. If they failed tonight, she'd be the twelfth and the fourteenth head at once, facing the very first practitioner of their line as an enemy.

"If I fail to protect myself in this exorcism," Subaru said without looking at Seishiro behind him. "I want you to kill this body. Do not allow my ancestor to leave this place in the flesh."

Seishiro had changed his suit for a shikifuku. A black shikifuku, with a blood-colored nagajuban underneath. A breeze blew leaves from the Tenshukakuaku across the place. Light golden eyes without glasses, an even lighter smile, when Subaru finally turned for him. "I shall." His nagajuban flashed crimson as he indicated the circle. "Shall we?"

A wide clay bowl stood in the exact center of the prepared circle. Once Seishiro had freed and relocated the spirit from his basement compartment, he'd retreat to maintain the banning field from the outside, leaving Subaru to deal with his ancestor. Seishiro hadn't been happy about the arrangement, but Subaru had been adamant about it. The spells written on his skin flashed hot when he entered the circle. Kneeling, he placed the sheathed wakizashi between him and the bowl and exchanged a final glance with Seishiro on the other side of the glowsticks. Then he raised the bowl of purified water and began his incantation. Pouring the water, he created the mirror to reflect hidden truths.

Seishiro tied up his sleeve. The floodlights reflected on the knife.

Subaru wouldn't close his shields until the spirit had arrived, and they couldn't seal the circle until its transfer was complete. Today, he wasn't prey. He was bait.

The water stilled, perfecting the mirror. The incantation reached its first crescendo.

Seishiro began to sing, his voice providing a counterpoint to Subaru's. Flashing, the knife cut into Subaru's skin. Blood welled down his arm onto his hand. With slow, heavy strokes he painted the runes into the earth. Their song didn't waver as he balled his fist, increasing the blood flow, forcing the spirit to manifest.

The Emperor's Murderer — Sado — couldn't have been older than sixteen when his body died. But in his day and age, sixteen had been the age of a grown man. A wide coat, made entirely of white feathers, rippled in the spirit wind. Red-colored Toki skulls broadened the shoulders, the long, curved black beaks clicking at every move, while angry green eyes lined with khol searched Subaru's.

The spirit wind flared, spreading Sado's feather coat wide as he pointed a solid right hand, red-lined nails aiming at Subaru's heart, reaching for the body that should have been his.

Green light enclosed them. Seishiro had triggered the glowsticks.

"Begone from my flesh, usurper," the spirit ordered. "Return what is rightfully mine and go on to the netherworld whole, while the slave to the Sakura shall weep before my feet this very night!"

"I don't think so," Subaru returned, closing his shields.

"Then cease *in fragments!*"

The spells on his skin flared to life as the spirit lashed at him, their bright light blinding even through the cloth of his shikifuku. Nails scraped over Subaru's skin, unable to break it. Ameru was good at spiritual protection.

Hissing, the spirit rebounded.

"Sado," Subaru called to him. "This is my life, not yours, and my time. Your actions are unnecessary in this day and age. Our house has achieved the station you dreamed of a long time ago. The onmyo's power was established over a thousand years ago." He decided against mentioning that it had also been dismantled after Heian dissolved in the warring states. "I have come to correct the wrong the servants of the Sakura did you. You don't need my body. You can move on peacefully now."

Black-lined eyes traced the perimeter, stopped at Seishiro. "Move on? Peacefully?" A sharp, bitter laugh. The skulls rattled as he raised his hands. "First I will toss the head of Amaterasu's heir to the Sakura in gratitude for its hospitality!" A flash burst out of red-rimmed fingertips, melting two of the glowsticks.

So much for moving him on peacefully. Subaru freed the wakizashi from its sheath. "I won't allow you to threaten his Imperial majesty."

"I told you before to be still when your elders speak," the spirit snarled at him. "I won't have you interfere with the emperor's timely demise!"

Subaru wrapped a piece of rice paper around the unprotected blade and laid his fingers around the paper-wrapped steel, setting the wakizashi's tip against his abdomen. He prayed that Seishiro believed him. "If you continue with this, I will kill this body and your line ends here and now."

"The line continues with the sister. The male was never required for that!"

Subaru's grip tightened around the blade. The steel felt cold as it broke through the paper into his skin, then the heat of pain followed as the nerves of his fingers registered the cut. He banished the sensation from his attention.

"Go on!" the spirit challenged. "I can wait for the next incarnation of my flesh."

Subaru raised his head, his hand slowly moving along the blade. "There won't be another reincarnation. My sister is dead. There is no descendant!"

"No!" The spirit flared, hair and feather coat flying. "That's a lie!"

The mirror of truth shattered. The incense urns overturned. Shards and burning wood clattered against the banning field, against Subaru. Shields against magic didn't stop ordinary objects hurled by magic. Refocusing, he ducked away from a finger long piece of burning wood. A shard hit his face. The marks on his hands flared. He turned. "No! Don't—"

Too late. Seishiro had entered the circle. "Truth!" he yelled against the turmoil. An illusion enclosed them, suppressing Sado's raging in its entirety. Seishiro wouldn't be able to hold that for long, while Hokuto's death seen through his eyes filled the circle.

*The white shikifuku glowed in the twilight under the Sakura. Prayer beads clicked. Pale sakura petals danced on the spirit wind around her, shining almost red against the pure white of the silk. The shikifuku was blown against her back, flying up before her.*

*"There are spells that only I have the power to cast," she said in the eerie quiet. "I knew the Sakurazukamori's true being. That's why I want you to kill me instead."*

*"I shall," Seishiro replied in the illusion. The voice sounded lighthearted, carefree. It was easy to imagine the speaker with a smile on his lips.*

Subaru forced himself to watch. Crimson shikifuku. Prayer beads bouncing away. He felt the tranquility of the decision in both — her and Seishiro, who withheld nothing, not the sensation of his hand buried in her body, not the spell powered by her life enclosing him, not her weight in his arms, her last words...

*"I want Subaru and you to live..."*

*The sensation of her hand, clean of blood, touching his cheek.*

*"...a person who can't fall in love doesn't exist... Sei-chan... Su..."*

*He heard his name on her last breath and felt the ripple of change unraveling structures set in stone by traditions for over a thousand years. The ancient Sakura towering above them remained utterly quiet, while she dissolved in sakura petals as white as her shikifuku had been.*

The illusion faded when Seishiro's power faltered and he fell down to his knees, utterly out of breath, under a tree that seemed to vibrate with power of its own. Sakura petals, tiny flames ignited by Sado's rage, became a burning tempest, enclosing him. Long nails clawed for his eyes and heart—

Subaru stood, the wakizashi bare in his hand. "Sado!" he yelled. "He's *mine!*"

The spirit stopped, eyed him incredulously. Then the feather coat flared and the Toki skulls rattled as Sado stepped aside with a gesture of mock chivalry. Subaru ignored it. Blood drops glittered on the steel of

the wakizashi as he stood over Seishiro, his eyes unwaveringly trained on the murderer of his sister. "Why?" he asked him in the shadow of the Sakura. *Why did you kill her?*

"She asked," Seishiro gasped.

Wind whipped up around them, tearing smoldering petals up from the ground, while Subaru studied Seishiro's face. Silk tassels and crane feathers whipped in the storm, when he raised the wakizashi with one hand, shielding his wrist with the other.

*"I'd ask myself why my magically inept sister had to ask my arch-enemy to spill her blood for her magic to work."* Seishiro had told him once.

Subaru gripped the wakizashi more firmly. Wetness trickled down his cut cheek, soaking the collar of his nagajuban. The spirit drew closer, licked expectant lips awaiting spilled blood. Lightning flashed overhead. Subaru struck—

— and Susumu's blood-covered steel nailed their ancestor to the Tree, a hand's width from Seishiro's throat. Dark red resin welled around the glistening wakizashi, half its length embedded in the black trunk. The sudden quiet filled with the intense rustling of the Sakura devouring its prey. The pentacle on the hilt flared, dimmed, flared again, mimicking a pulse Sado hadn't had for fourteen-hundred years...

## 19 — SumeraMori!

*The Tree was acutely aware of them, sensing Sei-chan through the bond with its Sakurazukamori and Su-chan through the residues of Kali and the blood on the summoned blade embedded in its trunk. Against the turmoil of the still raging spirit, it felt the tranquility of Su-chan, reaching for its Sakurazukamori, cupping his cheek like the sacrifice nine years ago had done with a hand devoid of the blood's warmth he held now. Yin and Yang, forming the Dao, with power perpetually flowing among them. The symbol had turned, who had been giving was now receiving, who had been weak was now strong...*

*The Sakura quivered, drowned the screams of Yue's opponent in blood-filled resin, and marveled at the perfect symmetry of the sources of the Dao, holding on to each other in the bright shadow underneath its crown.*

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
Kokyo East Gardens — Saineikan  
April 19, 2000 — 03:42

"I am his physical reincarnation," Subaru said tiredly, not for the first time tonight. "Had Sado's spirit been allowed to move on when he died, he would have been reborn into this body."

"But now he won't be reborn at all," Makoto stated with obvious revulsion in her voice. "Susumu's wakizashi recognized him through your blood and bound his gift, for—" she averted her eyes.

"—the Sakura to tear him apart," Subaru finished for her. He laid his good hand around the white coffee mug with Imperial Guard logo, both to absorb the warmth and to keep it from shaking.

Elder Makoto, Ameru-san, and he were sitting at a table in the staffroom near the Saineikan. It was a quarter to four in the morning. The coffee in his mug, bitter as it was, was courtesy of chief superintendent Shiibatani, who'd fetched them from the park after Subaru had given him a call. Seishiro had been almost unconscious on the short drive; now he was sound asleep in the small sickroom two doors down.

Subaru knew he'd have to rest soon, too. He felt cold and he couldn't hide his shivering any more. Controlling his marks to avoid hurting Seishiro was becoming more and more difficult.

But Makoto was relentless. "Are you sure that you didn't end your ancestor's spiritual existence because you selfishly cling to your own?"

Subaru sighed and gathered himself up. "Makoto-san," he said more firmly than he thought he still could, "I am exceedingly tired. I am about to fall asleep on this table. Sado killed emperor Sushun in his lifetime and he was involved in more than one imperial death since he became a spirit. Our whole clan could have been executed for his first crime and the later ones are a permanent stain on our professional reputation. I tried to move him on, but I couldn't allow him to claim another life, imperial or not." He pushed his chair back. As far as he was concerned, this talk was over. This—

The room was spinning. He reached for the edge of the table. His hand slid off—

~::~::~~

Ameru nearly stumbled under his son's weight. He slung an arm around Subaru's back to stabilize him, finding him too warm to the touch. "Allow me to help," he said quietly when Subaru tried to stand on his own.

"Subaru-san, we aren't done yet," Makoto said sternly behind him. "We're all tired, but—"

Ameru had enough. "He's worn out," he said angrily, ignoring their difference in rank. "He's got to rest before you can continue your questioning."

Subaru stirred in his hold. "Please don't bother, I—"

"It's all right," Ameru soothed him. Turning his back on Makoto, he slowly walked them toward the door. "There's a room prepared for you. It's just a few meters down the hallway. Do you think you can manage with my help?"

"No... The marks..." Subaru said. "I lose my shields... hurts..." The door closed between them and Makoto. "Seishiro... get me to Seishiro."

"Maybe he should hurt," Ameru muttered, "for leaving all the work to you. He should have been in the circle from the beginning, not—"

"Didn't want him... inside... he... nearly died last week. ... little ch'i left."

*Nearly died last week?* Ameru blinked. The Sakurazukamori had come to his archenemy's stronghold with reduced ch'i?

They stopped in front of the sick room.

"Please, I—" Subaru reached for the door.

Ameru opened it. He glanced at the dark shadow barely visible in the room lit solely by the "emergency exit" sign above the door. He shouldn't be doing this. He was bringing his son to a murderer who had hurt him before, who—

But still he helped Subaru sit down on the bed. Some of the strain seeped out of his son's face and shoulders even before he lay down. The Sakurazukamori hadn't been the only one hurting, Ameru realized as he tucked him in. One of the ubiquitous plastic chairs stood beside the door. A coat was thrown over it. Ameru folded it and laid it aside before sitting down for his vigil.

Hokuto's murderer. His nails dug into his palms. Hokuto's *decision*.

~::~::~~

Seishiro woke suddenly, going from deep sleep to alertness within a breath at the faint scraping of the door over the floor. Entirely silent marks told him that the warmth curled against his side was Subaru. Who—?

The creak of a chair. Voices carefully kept low—

"Subaru-san still has to answer the questions." Elder Makoto, Seishiro's throbbing head provided reluctantly. "It's in his own interest."

"He's still asleep." Shiro? What was he doing here? "Please allow him to sleep some more. He needs the rest." They certainly weren't talking about him.

"The council won't wait that long."

Footsteps neared the bed and Seishiro cursed his glasses now lying out of reach on the side-stand.

"Subaru-san?"

Subaru beside him stirred, mumbling something against his chest. The whiff of a sleeping spell, applied to keep Subaru sound-asleep despite the disturbances, decreased Seishiro's mood by the same amount by which it increased his headache. He clasped his hand firmly around the elder's frail wrist when she was about to prod his prey. "You will talk with *me*," he hissed, "or you won't talk at all."

"Sakurazuka-san," Shiro called. "Please—"

"I must protest." Makoto tried to free her hand.

Shiro pulled something white from his pocket.

A fuda? Seishiro narrowed his eyes, trying to discern the spell on it, while tightening his grip. He felt the old bones grinding together. "I'm sorry for being imprecise," he said sweetly. "You won't talk *ever again* if you continue this. Am I making myself clear?"

The old woman gasped, exasperated, retreating immediately when he released her. "Your behavior is beyond contempt."

"Is it?" Seishiro returned acidly. "What about yours?"

"We apologize." Shiro, still near the door, bowed. The white object was gone from his hand. "Subaru-sama—"

"Will sleep. And *you*," he fixated Makoto, "will leave. I'll answer your questions later."

Shiro was waiting outside when Seishiro stepped into the corridor ten minutes later, his mood somewhat improved by a change of underwear and a double dose of acetaminophen.

"Please understand that elder Makoto is worried on Subaru-sama's behalf," Shiro said quietly. "Sunday's... events put the house in chaos. She used considerable influence to be sent here as observer. She fears that if she takes too long to complete her report, other members of the council with a less favorable view of Subaru-sama's plans might consider her words biased in his favor."

"Ever heard of report forms?" Seishiro retorted, heading down the hallway to the actual dojo. "Give me fifteen minutes. And no geckos."

"Would butterflies be more convenient?" Shiro inquired, unperturbed. "I'll make sure elder Makoto waits in the staffroom."

Seishiro closed the door to the dressing area. The faint drumming of feet and an occasional call told him that the dojo was in use. One of the benches at the far wall held several neat stacks of grey uniforms. A clock on the wall above them told him the time: half past eight. He'd better hurry; Michiko would inquire soon and he'd prefer not having her have a run-in with Subaru's relatives on imperial ground. He put his fresh clothes on the first empty bench near him and undressed.

Towels were provided next to the wet area. He took the first open shower stall. Warm water rained down the moment the sensors registered the stall as occupied. For a brief moment, he just stood, having the water massage his shoulders before he squeezed some shower gel into his hand and erased the obnoxious smell of sweat and earth from his skin.



He was in the middle of soaping his face when the door opened, making him hastily grab the towel to wipe the soap from his eyes.

"Really, Seishiro," Michiko said, amused. "Most men would cover something other than their face."

"What for?" He continued with dabbing his arms and sides and inwardly cursed the absence of his glasses. "There's nothing you haven't seen yet."

"Nothing I haven't seen?" She arched a mocking brow. "You're mistaking me for my sister, mister! Though I'm sure Mariko will be thrilled to hear that all your important parts are still in place."

He tossed the towel over his shoulder and pushed past her, heading for the bank where he'd left his clothes.

"Nice ass," she commented.

"Michiko," he growled, slipping into his pants. "You might want to recall what I do for a living."

"Yes," she smiled sweetly. "But registering a nice ass doesn't qualify as spiritual danger and I just saved that nice ass by declaring the choice of Honshu-san to be the Sakura's decision. Besides, my current successor for Shikoku is Miyagi and I doubt you'd want that hardliner from Kyushu almost two flight hours closer to home."

Kyushu was indeed a matter to be dealt with in the foreseeable future. Seishiro gave her that. He shook out his shirt and put it on, buttoning fast. "Since you're here to assess my physique instead of waiting for my call, I assume they accepted your argument."

She snorted at that. "I'd expect you to answer your calls, before I start waiting for yours. Time's running out, I expect you and the new Honshu-san in the office this afternoon." She eyed him from head to toes, arching a perfectly plucked brow at him. "Presentable, if possible."

"Twenty hundred," he corrected and threw the used towel at her. "After dark. In case we require discreet disposals." He collected his used clothes and headed for the door. "Have the section leaders present."

~::~::~~

Subaru woke slowly. Seishiro's scent still clung to the blanket around him and for a few breaths he just lay there, resting his forehead against the cotton. When he finally forced himself to sit up, he winced at the tearing pain in his left palm. He'd forgotten that he'd closed his hand around a blade. The wound was covered with a thick gauze pad and an elastic bandage. It throbbed angrily now, as did his—

He ran tentative fingertips across his cheek, finding the cut there closed with two butterfly stitches. He'd been too worn yesterday... this morning... *before*... to notice the injuries.

And there'd been the blood used for the runes as well. Subaru sighed, knowing how that had to look from elder Makoto's point of view. Still, it had been the easiest way to lure Sado in and still deny him the additional burst in power.

Seishiro had used a sterilized blade, cutting with the precision of a surgeon. The wound had been treated. Yet, it still throbbed in the rhythm of Subaru's pulse.

His pulse. Not Sado's.

"Are you sure that you didn't end your ancestor's spiritual existence because you selfishly cling to your own?" Makoto's stern voice asked in his memory. A question he'd left unanswered last night, because...

Would he have done the same if Seishiro's life hadn't been at stake?

Would he have done anything different if he didn't feel... that much for him?

*"I will toss the head of Amaterasu's heir..."*

Yes, he would have. Differently perhaps, but he would have. He would have seen his ancestor scattered rather than moved on after he'd threatened the emperor. Still, he would have preferred to do that without involving the Sakura.

Subaru sighed and got up. A glance in the mirror above the small washstand showed him that there was still a smear on the side of his throat where the blood from his cheek had soaked into the nagajuban, coloring it as red as Seishiro's. Elder Makoto had insisted on having it, and the equally stained shikifuku, burned before they even sat down to discuss the exorcism. Subaru wondered what she'd have done had she got her hands on Seishiro's all-crimson one.

A determined knock on the door interrupted him. "Sumeragi-san? This is Kisaraki."

"Yes?" Subaru ran a hand through his still disheveled hair and opened the door. "What is it?"

"Good morning." The guard officer stopped at the sight of his bandages, then caught himself with a crisp bow. "There's a woman waiting for you at the administration's reception. And chief superintendent Shiibatani asks for spiritual clearance to reopen the park for the public."

"Of course," Subaru reached for his coat and checked that the bundle of emergency ofuda was still in its sleeve. "I'll take care of it immediately."

~::~::~~

"Our magic is like a credit card system," Seishiro explained. "You do the spell, get the effect, and are billed by sakanagi." He shrugged. "Runes, on the other hand, only accept cash."

"So you have to provide *blood* beforehand?" Makoto asked, her voice carefully neutral. Shiro hadn't said much since they'd entered the room. The old woman did the grilling alone.

"Blood. Courage. Endurance," Seishiro confirmed. "Runes aren't for the squeamish, but they're convenient when it comes to imprisoning a powerful spirit: power or not, a spirit has no body to bargain with."

"So by using Subaru's blood for the spell, you made sure that Sado couldn't use the blood against you?"

"Against Subaru," Seishiro corrected. In reality, he simply hadn't been in a condition to give enough to release the spirit and stay lucid, but he wasn't going to admit that. "You probably want to add to your report that in the Norse system blood is an agent of life and ritual cleansing."

She looked up. "Isn't that true for your brand of onmyojutsu as well?"

"You might be surprised, but we clean with water and fire, sake and prayer," Seishiro replied dryly. "And soap and disinfectant, if it's the kitchen."

Makoto shook her head at the last comment. "You are a difficult man, Sakurazukamori," she stated, "but Subaru-san's right, our clans should have talked centuries ago."

"Indeed," Seishiro agreed. "For example about the wakizashi he had brought from Kyoto."

The old woman winced at that. Interesting. Also interesting that the spirit of Subaru's ancestor had writhed on the blade as if it had been in the flesh.

"Would you care to elaborate on it now?" Seishiro inquired with a mask of polite, entirely scholarly interest.

"Susumu was the only clan head who ever committed seppuku," Makoto said in a low voice. "He cast a spell on his blade to make it consume his gift along with his life when he opened his belly, in order to make his repentance for alienating Tokugawa Ieyasu complete." The old woman fell silent for a moment. Her gnarled hands lay still in her lap. "It worked," was all she finally said.

That wasn't all. "And?" Seishiro prompted.

An uneasy silence followed his question. In the end it was Shiro who answered him. "Susumu's blade is still hungry."

~::~::~~

Kokyo East Gardens — administration area

Subaru hurried downstairs after he'd given the clearance to chief superintendent Shiibatani in person. The reception was deserted, but a woman in a slim tailored skirt suit was waiting outside on the stairs. She turned when he pushed through the door. A small, delicate hat with a thin swathe of gauze obscured her features surprisingly well. "Sumeragi-san?"

"Yes." He bowed in greeting. "I'm sorry I took so long."

"I'm afraid it is I who has to apologize for calling on you like this." She inclined her head briefly. "My name's Fujiwara Mariko." Indicating the general direction of the park, she asked, "May we have a brief walk? The gardens are said to be beautiful this time of the year."

They headed down one of the sandy paths connecting the administration area with the inner garden. Birds twittered overhead. The trees and bushes around them were covered in the fresh green of spring. "May I inquire about the reason for your interest in me?" Subaru asked after the greenery had closed around them.

"Of course." Her shoes made small crunching sounds on the gravel of the path. "I want to know with whom the father of my children sleeps."

Subaru missed a step, staring at her in disbelief. "Children...?"

"Yes, we've got three. A girl and two boys. I assume Seishiro didn't bother to mention them." Wind rustled in the pines and cloud-like shadows moved across the water of the pond below.

Subaru shook his head. "You must be mistaken. Seishiro—"

She continued slowly down the stone steps. "Tell me, does he still object to being held during sex?"

Subaru stopped dead-still. The tall trees and fresh greens, almost glowing in the light from the early morning sun, seemed to spin about him.

Children... Seishiro had... This woman was...

"Are you coming?" she called from the stone bridge spanning the pond below. "I'd prefer not to shout."

He caught up with her. "I'm sorry. I—" He stopped. He didn't know what to say, what to feel. He couldn't fathom the hurt Seishiro had done her. *He* had done her. It hadn't even occurred to him that Seishiro... Seishiro could be...

"Sumeragi-san." She stopped at the low stone encasement and looked out over the dark green water, already dotted with lotus leaves. "There's something you have to understand. Seishiro and I—" She laughed.

It made him cringe inwardly. "I'm well aware that I wasn't his choice. Yet he never made it unpleasant and he could have done so. Easily."

The angry scream of a raptor reverberated off the cliff behind them. A dark shadow whizzed across the stones of the bridge. A large white falcon was circling overhead. A shiki? Subaru shaded his eyes and—

Fujiwara-san took his unbandaged hand; her fingertips briefly touched the pale scar on its back.

Releasing him, she brushed the veil away from her face, revealing clear grey eyes in a narrow, energetic face. "Our daughter turned sixteen this spring," she said unexpectedly. "And the boys are eight. I've never had to worry about their provisions or mine, and our house in Osaka is fully paid. I won't give that up."

Her fierce statement shook Subaru. "I don't want—" he began, but she raised her hand, silencing him.

"Don't misunderstand me. If, in all those years, he'd looked at me just once like he looks at you, I would fight." Her expression softened. "But as things are, I will be content. With three wonderful children and the knowledge that he, too, has found a measure of happiness, even if it's not with me." She inclined her head briefly, dismissing him. "Have a good day."

Subaru watched her leave, a slender frame in ash grey and bleached rose. Seishiro's... *wife*. She didn't look as if she could have a sixteen-year-old daughter. Seishiro couldn't have been more than a boy himself when—

~::~::~~

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
parking lot in front of the Palace hotel  
opposite the Otemon gate  
09:23

Michiko was waiting for her as promised. Leaning against the open driver's door of her red sports car, legs casually crossed at the ankles, her younger sister drew frequent glances from the passers-by, and from the hotel porter. Not that she seemed to mind.

She pushed her sunglasses up into her hair. "He isn't what you expected him to be, is he?" she asked calmly when Mariko reached her.

"No," Mariko sighed. Her younger sister had always been too perceptive. The shadow of a falcon flitted over the asphalt of the parking lot. She would have to have a word with Seiran when she got home. Still... "I expected him to be less refined, you know, a sexual being." She made a helpless gesture with her purse. "Someone, who'd—" She shook her head. "It's hard to describe."

Michiko nodded, pushing herself off her car. "Did you see his hands?" she asked, opening the passenger door for her.

"He's marked." Mariko looked back towards the East Gardens before getting into the car. She put her purse onto the dashboard and tugged at the seatbelt. "Has been for a long time, from the look of those scars."

Michiko got behind the wheel. "He always wore gloves — spell-protected gloves — when I was in Kyoto."

Mariko looked up from fastening her safety belt and frowned. "That was when? Ten— fifteen years ago?"

"Twelve," Michiko confirmed, closing the driver's door with verve.

"He probably didn't have much of a say in the matter," Mariko said thoughtfully.

"Probably not," Michiko agreed.

"Is he really as strong as Seishiro?"

"He was Seishiro's counterpart in the now-not-so-Final Year." Michiko shrugged. "And lived."

"Which might have other reasons than his magical abilities," Mariko returned dryly, but she didn't believe it herself. Things would be a lot easier if she could hate Sumeragi. She couldn't.

Michiko started the car.

~::~::~~

Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo  
Kokyo East Gardens — Saineikan  
09:27

The door to the staff room rattled in its hinges when Subaru opened it with the full force of his anger. Seishiro sat with elder Makoto and Ameru-san at the same table at which Makoto had questioned him last night.

"You ought to query your marks more subtly." Seishiro didn't so much as turn. "Your approach was a little hard to miss."

Subaru ignored him. "Ameru-san, elder Makoto. Please leave us alone."

Makoto huffed. "Subaru-san, self-control is a virtue for—"

"I said *get out*," Subaru snapped, without taking his eyes off Seishiro. "Now!"

"Makoto-sama," he heard Ameru say in his quiet voice. "Please follow Subaru-sama's expressed wish, even if his choice of words doesn't give credit to his manners."

Subaru waited for the sound of the door closing. "When did you plan to tell me?!" he spat the moment they were gone.

"Care to enlighten me what I was supposed to tell you?" Seishiro asked, pushing his chair back.

"You. Married. Father of three. Living in Osaka."

Seishiro blinked. "I'm not married, Subaru-kun."

"I just had a talk with your *wife*!" Subaru bit out.

"I'm not married," Seishiro repeated patiently. "You must be mistaken."

"Am I?" Subaru asked acidly. "*Mariko-san* was quite convincing!"

"I'm the father of her children, not her husband." Seishiro corrected him. "I'm sure even you know that marriage isn't a requirement for children. It's merely a social convention." A dismissive gesture. "And may I remark that you didn't consider Akiko-chan worthy of mention, either?"

"Stop being evasive!" Subaru slammed his hand flat on the table. "You have children. You are responsible for them."

Seishiro stood. The feet of his chair made a screeching sound on the floor. "Because I got told place, date and time and couldn't refuse at eighteen? *Just like you?*"

"At least, *I* offered my name had there been a child!"

"Names aren't required for fucking. Just for signing the bills!"

"You—" Subaru balled his fists. This was all wrong. "Your daughter's sixteen! You fathered her right after you made the bet with me!"

"The week before, actually." Seishiro shrugged. "And in a way *you* are responsible for the boys, so you better not hold them against me."

"How can I be responsible for your children?! I—"

"Losing depth perception is a death sentence in my business," Seishiro snapped. "I owe my life to the fact that my daughter inherited my talent. I got the time to adjust to my changed vision because they wanted me to breed some more." He laughed. A wry, cynical sound. "Not that it matters. The boys don't have a scrap of talent and their sister is old enough to kill me—"

"No!" Subaru cut in, shaken. "You—"

"Not?" Seishiro arched a brow at him. "Tradition makes her my successor, and she's already older than I was when—"

Subaru laid his hand over Seishiro's mouth. "No," he said. "Fuck tradition."

The silence following his words was absolute. Breaths feathered over his hand. Seishiro, kissing his palm after catching his wrist in a death grip. Painful. Enticing. Subaru swallowed. The words caught in his throat.

"Fuck tradition."

~::~::~~

Ameru watched the door to the staffroom thoughtfully. Elder Makoto, rightfully displeased, had decided to confer with the chief superintendent, leaving him here to wait for 'Subaru-san to come to his senses'.

Subaru, who had apparently inherited more from Sachiko than just her green eyes. Not that the Sakurazukamori didn't match his temper. Their voices had become loud, angry, cutting effortlessly through the thin door...

Now there was utter silence, making Ameru worry about Subaru's physical health. If it continued, he might have to evoke the protective spells—

He tensed when the door opened.

"Ameru-san?" Subaru appeared unharmed. And determined. The Sakurazukamori was following behind him. Of course, this could all be a maboroshi...

...no, he wouldn't succumb to that sort of paranoia. "Subaru-sama." He gave a small bow. "Makoto-sama told me to get her immediately once you settled your—" He stopped short of 'lover's quarrel'. "—dispute."

"That won't be necessary," Sakurazuka told him, heading towards the sick room which still held their luggage. "We're leaving."

"There is too much to be done today for us to stay any longer," Subaru explained. "Please inform elder Makoto that I will fax a proper report to the main house later today. She may give her own account of last night's exorcism truthfully based on what she saw. I've got nothing to hide." There was pain in his words. And pride as he glanced briefly at the Sakurazukamori, who was returning with his suitcase and Subaru's satchel. "Not any more."

"I will." Ameru gave him a proper bow. He swallowed. Sachiko's eyes were looking at him. Bright, determined green, deep enough to—

Something must have shown on his face. Subaru caught his wrist. "Who *are* you?"

"Shiro Ameru," he said hoarsely, freeing his hand as he stepped back, bowing again. "Let's leave it at that."

~::~::~~

Ueno Koen exit of Ueno Station, Tokyo  
10:28

Seishiro ground his teeth as he crossed from the sunlit plaza in front of Ueno Station into the moving shadows of the less frequented paths of the park, while Subaru was continuing on the train to Uguisudani, taking their luggage home. A headache had begun to throb in his temples, reminding him that he was overexerting himself. Again. Still, what he had learned of the wakizashi Subaru had sunk into the Tree's trunk was worrisome. Whether or not it would affect the Sakura depended greatly on how well Subaru's suicidal ancestor had focused his spell.

A spell still active after four hundred years... Was the blade feeding on the powers it consumed or actually storing them? And if so, for whom?

Fine gravel scrunched under the leather soles of his shoes. The sun was hot on his shoulders and, after a moment, he shucked his jacket and carried it over his shoulder as he left the path, walking the last meters through the spring-fresh grass. The Sakura's physical hold in the world of the living appeared healthy from afar, and the Sakura itself was reassuringly strong in his mind when the eternal maboroshi closed around him, filling the air with the scents of blossoms and blood.

He abandoned his jacket over one of the smaller branches and, shirt-sleeved, pulled himself up to rest against the trunk in the first large fork. Allowing the Sakura's power to flow through him in the rhythm of his pulse, he eased his fatigue while searching for changes in its overall presence. A nosy twig wound into his collar, a second played with his wrist. He winced when a third brushed over the pulse in his throat. He caught it with a firm, "No."

Surprisingly, the Tree yielded, thickening the blossoms around him.

"How does your newest acquisition do?" Seishiro asked casually, savoring the additional cushion.

*...he's a loud one...* the Tree rustled. *...it will take many drupes in many years to scatter him properly...*

Seishiro glanced down at the glittering silver thorn protruding from its side. The resin had hardened around it to something like black scab. "What about the blade?"

The branch right above his head moved at his words. A tuft of blossoms ruffled his hair. *...Are you worried?...*

"Curious." Seishiro huffed. "I wondered what *they* came up with to harm themselves."

The Tree shook as if laughing. *...It's binding Sumeragi magic. It offers the prey once touched...*

*So Subaru's ancestor created a link to the veil between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Had he been aware that he offered his gift to the Sakura?* Seishiro frowned, considering it unlikely. *Still interesting. More than interesting, actually.* He settled back into the blossoms. He would have to investigate that. "So, shall I bring Subaru to remove it?"

*...in a few years when Yue's infatuation is more scattered...* More blossoms closed around him. *...Make sure he survives until then...*

"If he survives tonight." Seishiro suppressed a yawn.

The blossoms tightened. *...Make sure that he does...*

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo  
10:41

The house lay quiet in the late morning sun. Seen through the dark iron bars of the gate, its pale yellow facade appeared brighter, more cheerful than Subaru remembered it to be. Yoshi sat in front of the door, looking at him expectantly. From the looks of his ruffled fur, he'd managed to squeeze his bulk through the gate. Light wind moved the branches of the ancient ginkgo behind the house, adding the rustle of still young leaves to the faint singing of the guardian dead. Their quiet melody closed around Subaru the moment he stepped through the gate, dragging Seishiro's suitcase over worn stone slabs. Yoshi rose, slunk leisurely toward him to worm around his legs and — ultimately — topple the suitcase to sit on it. With a fatalistic shrug Subaru released the handle and went inside, leaving case and cat outside in the sun.

He left the key on the small hallway table at the top of the steps and stopped, looked back through the open front door at the abandoned suitcase outside and frowned. Why was the cat unaffected by the sleeping spell wrought on the third step when it strolled in? It didn't have a key...

Subaru shook his head and headed into the kitchen. The phone rang when he was putting on the water for tea. He answered it on the fourth ringing. "Sak—" There wasn't a reason to hide their names on the phone any longer, was there? But just in case— "Yes, please?"

=Sumeragi-san?= — Imonoyama.

"On the line."

=Wonderful.= The relief in the chairman's voice was almost palpable. =Is everything alright? I've been trying to reach you since our abruptly terminated call last week.=

"I'm sorry. I— we had a difficult exorcism. We've barely been home since then." And when they'd been home, there hadn't been time to worry about phones, faxes, and other mundane tasks.

=In that case I have to apologize.= Imonoyama laughed. =I'm afraid I've been the bane of your mailbox.=

"Concern for another person's well-being is never a reason to apologize, Imonoyama-san," Subaru replied. "Please do not worry about it."

=Thank you. However, I'm calling with a request. Kotori-chan's obit is coming up and I'm making arrangements for a memorial service at her grave. She was a member of the Togakushi shrine, but given the circumstances of her death, having the current kannushi hold the ceremony seems inappropriate.=

"Very," Subaru confirmed. "Do you want me to hold the service for her?" he guessed.

=It would be a great relieve. I'm certain Kamui-kun will approve.=

Seishiro wouldn't, but he'd worry about that later. "Do you know who will attend?"

=Kamui and Mono-kun for sure. Kasumi-san. Aoki-san wasn't sure he'd be in time due to a manga event in Nagasaki, and I haven't heard from Nekoi-san. There was no trace of Arisugawa or Kishuu-san.=

"I know how to contact them," Subaru told him. "I'll make sure they'll get the invitation in time. You might want to inform the others that I will bring Seishiro, in case the Twin Star makes an appearance."

=Of course.= There was a brief hesitation, then, =The service is scheduled for ten in the morning. I'll make sure the facilities at the mansion are available for your preparations.=

"That will be very helpful. Thank you."

=No, thank you for helping me out at such a short notice.= Imonoyama stated firmly. =Until Saturday, then.=

"I'm honored to hold the service, Imonoyama-san. Until Saturday." Subaru hung up and made a note on the writing pad. A memorial service with both Kamui being present. Sakura tea forced down his throat and a dire warning about decisions not being Seishiro's alone crossed his mind. He would have to be careful. A whiff of fresh air whispered in, reminding him that the front door was still open. The water cooker beeped in the kitchen. And stopped. "Seishiro?"

"He's sleeping at the Sakura," Yue's calm voice said behind him.

Subaru turned, finding the spirit entirely solid. Sheathed jian in hand. Fourteen-hundred years old and capable of passing for a living in broad daylight. A spirit, who should have moved on. Suddenly, he felt tired. "Why are you still here?" he asked. "Sado is gone. You can rest now."

Yue shrugged daintily and smiled. "I don't want to. This is too interesting."

"But your unresolved responsibility is fulfilled."

"And I thank you for that." Yue sounded amused. "I'm sure Sei-chan's life is a lot easier now. If only with respect to his basement." He straightened, sobered. "The Sakura sends word that it accepts your claim, as long as his continuing service is unaffected."

"My cl—" Subaru stopped. "*I claim your life,*" he'd told Seishiro in the East Gardens yesterday — life, because the offered death had been an unbearable concept — and now the Sakura had answered, dead serious. "Can you—" he began, but Yue was gone.

Subaru was alone in the bedroom.

~::~::~~

Sagano-cho, Kyoto (West)  
Sumeragi Family Residence

"To think that the child even secured imperial support for his plans." The former head of the Sumeragi sighed. "I never thought he'd go so far."

"So we were truly graced with a visit?" Makoto stoked the glowing coals in the small iron tea stove standing between them. The visit from Subaru's grandmother hadn't come unexpected. "An honor not given to our house since before the abdication of the last shogun," she continued.

"If only Subaru-san's initiative weren't that harebrained." The former head inclined her head in sorrow. "The shame when it fails..."

"The esteem when he succeeds." Makoto put the coal tongues aside and infused a cup of tea with water. "You should have faith in Subaru-san. He's a grown man with sound reasoning."

"Infatuated with the Sakurazukamori."

"No," Makoto corrected quietly. "In love with the Sakurazukamori; but he is neither blinded nor governed by that love. The Sakurazukamori doesn't control him any more than he controls the Sakurazukamori." If only Subaru's grandmother would believe that. "I observed the whole ritual last night and the dynamics between them. I talked with them afterwards, with *both* of them. And Subaru-san's right, the feud is a disgrace. We should have talked with the Sakurazukamori ages ago."

"You don't know him. You don't know what that man is capable of."

"Allow me to speak freely," Makoto said in a formal voice. "You forget what Subaru-san is capable of, and he knows the Sakurazukamori in ways we can't even begin to imagine."

Subaru's grandmother laughed humorlessly. "The child was nearly destroyed by him, Makoto. How can we trust Subaru-san to defeat him this time?"

"You said it yourself: the child. For you, Subaru-san has always been the child you raised, your beloved grandson to be protected at all costs. Back then, he was that child, innocent and naive and not capable of handling what he was facing. But that has changed. He is a grown man, a professional, and he knows what he is dealing with. Intimately."

Another wry sound. "He made entirely sure that we know that." The twelfth head averted her eyes. "And you call that mature?"

Makoto sighed. "No. I call it desperate."

~::~::~~

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo

15:55

"*The Sakura accepts your claim, as long as his continuing service is unaffected.*" The message repeated itself in Subaru's head, together with "*Keep in mind that some decisions aren't mine alone.*" He'd opened one of the French windows, pushing it wide to sit on the floor with his back to the bed, his feet dangling outside over already lush grass. He'd been in the shadow at first, but now Amaterasu's warmth touched his face.

Pulling a leg up, Subaru rested his chin on his knee, listening to his ferns swaying outside in the breeze. Their whispers mingled with the rustle of the ginkgo's leaves and the song of the guardian dead filling the house. Occasionally, a sun ray passed through the old tree's crown and a frond in its shadow shone bright emerald green.

"*Keep in mind that some decisions aren't mine alone,*" Seishiro had told him, and Subaru hadn't heeded the advice. On the contrary, he'd thought only of Seishiro, and now the Sakura had accepted his claim instead.

Subaru shivered. The protective spells still inked on his skin itched under Amaterasu's heat. What would he do on the day Seishiro did not return, when Seishiro's life — claimed or not — was taken away and another guardian served the Tree? Subaru closed his eyes. Would he be able to work with Seishiro's successor? The scars on the back of his hands tingled, knowing better.

"*I will be content,*" Mariko had said. "*With the knowledge that he, too, has found a measure of happiness.*"

Outside, the wheels of the suitcase clacked over the stones. The front door closed and Seishiro's faint "tadaima" came from the genkan. The following sound of someone stumbling on the stairs and a "You're supposed to be *Yoshino's* cat!" almost called a smile to Subaru's lips.

Almost. Because he wasn't as strong as Mariko-san. He couldn't be content like that.

Subaru kicked his shoes into the garden and stood.

Seishiro was already shrugging out of his jacket when he came into the bedroom, followed by an enthused Yoshi more or less circling around him. "Sorry about the delay." A swift tug released the knot of his tie. "I was held up in the park." There was no gun in his belt when he opened the closet.

"Obviously." Subaru plucked a sakura petal out of Seishiro's hair, inspected it, and showed it to him. Pale pink was lined with the maroon of yesterday's blood, a reminder of their exorcism. "You risked my life when you entered the circle." The *And yours.* remained unsaid.

"You were about to lose." Seishiro put his jacket on a hanger and patted the tie flat before hanging it up as well. "Sado had already drawn blood."

"Sado couldn't afford to be wrong." A fluffy, red-tabbied tail vanished between the hanging clothes and Subaru hurried to keep Yoshi from getting locked in. "As I was about to tell him." *And you.* Also unsaid.

"Sado wasn't entirely sane."

"But determined with his plans." Subaru scratched the cat between the ears, earning a contented purring and a frown from Seishiro, who locked the closet. He sat Yoshi down on the bed. "As am I. But I need to know what I'm dealing with."

"Indeed. We've got a section meeting at 8 pm." Seishiro had sat down at his desk, was already booting the laptop.

"Today?" Subaru asked incredulously. "It didn't occur to you to tell me sooner?"

"It was arranged this morning," Seishiro said, frowning through his glasses. "I didn't know any sooner myself."

"And you expect me to face an organization of spiritual *killers* without any preparation in—" Subaru glanced at the alarm clock on the bedside table. "—less than four hours?!"

Seishiro laughed. "The way you say that sounds like they're *yakuza*."

"For all I know they could be worse!" Subaru snapped. "What you told me about them at the end of the bet doesn't fit with what I learned about them since I've been here."

"And what did you learn?" Seishiro asked deceptively soft, swiveling around to face him.

"I know that they tried to kill you," Subaru stated flatly, "and it took the goddess of Death and Creation to stop them. They ordered you to have children with a woman in Osaka, children who will try to kill you." Seishiro tensed at his words, Subaru continued, digging his nails into his palms to remain calm. "You're the judge of the emperor, yet you bargain for a mere appointment, risking your life — and mine —, because *they* would not wait." The marks tingled now despite their proximity. "That's not collaborating, that's collaring!"

Silence. Seishiro sat motionless, Subaru standing three steps away from him. They both started when the laptop beeped. Seishiro swiveled around, entered another command and the screen filled with the now familiar logo of the sakura blossom with swords. He didn't look up from the screen when he said, "I told you what the Mori are supposed to be and will be again, when I'm done with them. They're meant to be serfs, not lords."

"Slavery is outlawed," Subaru reminded him.

"Employment isn't." Seishiro glanced at him. "For all parties involved." He nodded towards the end of the bed. "Sit down. This will take a while."

Subaru gingerly sat. "What happened?" he asked quietly. Yoshi rubbed against his back, demanding attention Subaru didn't have to spare right now.

"A succession gone wrong, I assume." Seishiro ran a hand through his hair, brushed it back from his face, then rested his elbows on the desk before the laptop. "It seems one of my predecessors got himself killed without a definite killer or a ready successor, leaving the Sakura without a guardian. His Mori offered one of theirs as temporary replacement and they obviously learned quickly that by controlling the guardian, they controlled the Sakura, and the Sakura is—"

"—power," Subaru completed quietly.

"Indeed." Seishiro nodded. "The spell that forces the killer of a Sakurazukamori to become the next one was designed to make sure the position is never vacant and filled by the most powerful onmyoji. Because if a weak person killed a Sakurazukamori by accident, the planned successor could reclaim the position easily, and in case of a strong magician the successor would be defeated. Succession used to mean passing on the spell by either recasting or death. The Mori relies solely on the second option to ensure succession according to their plans."

But Seishiro's curiosity about the campus, and his mother's madness, had driven him to the Tree before they were ready to control him. Subaru suppressed a shiver, wondering how many others had been killed. How many— Since— "When did that happen?"

"1868, judged by the abrupt change in the way the chronicles were kept."

And nobody had noticed, because the Sakurazukamori was supposed to be invisible. Subaru felt cold as the last piece of the puzzle fell into place. The Sumeragi wanted optimized spiritual protection, but Seishiro sought something profane: visibility as an individual. With them working together, replacing the Sakurazukamori on a whim was no longer possible, because *the Sumeragi* would know, would ask...

"*I want you to see—*"

Their first time at Imonoyama's. Seishiro had forced him to look at their reflection in the window pane.

"—*see precisely what's being done to you.*" Seishiro's hands had lain on his throat, his skin. "*And who is doing it to you.*" Seishiro—

—who snipped his fingers. "Things are happening here. Bed sports will have to wait until after the meeting." The screen he'd tilted slightly towards Subaru showed something like personnel files. "Now, regarding the people you'll have to deal with tonight..."

Kasumigaseki-cho, Tokyo  
19:53

*Motohiro really looks like the financial accountant he is*, Subaru thought as he entered the conference room of Sakura Enterprises' Tokyo office, stopping just inside while Seishiro swept further into the room. If Seishiro hadn't told him that the man was also a specialist in poisons—

Subaru watched seasoned Mori members hurry for their seats around the large oval table. The deep-red and black grained wood was polished to gleam, reflecting the light coming from three of the four wall-



mounted screens: leaders of other Mori sections present via scrambled video conference. The fourth belonged to Shikoku-section, whose leader was here in person. He glanced at the woman who took the chair to Seishiro's left. Fujiwara Michiko, age thirty-seven, Mariko-san's sister. It was hard to believe that this energetic businesswoman was a Mori senior, but Seishiro had warned him. "*Never take her for harmless. Dead, torn to pieces and buried twenty meters deep in concrete, Michiko wouldn't be harmless.*" Subaru recalled the words precisely. And she'd been the only one to greet him...

Powerful wards had burned against the scars on his hands since he'd entered the house. Wards he hadn't even noticed last week — but the Sakura had been with him then. And Kali.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen." The shuffling of chairs ended. Seishiro's voice filled the room easily. A good speaker's voice, rich, nuanced, melodious—

*Or maybe I'm biased*, Subaru admitted wryly to himself.

"The herewith proven fact that I am not dead, and the circumstances of how this came to pass, require a few changes in personnel." Faces paled at 'changes in personnel'. "Your attempt to secure my position for a more conservative aspirant failed last Thursday and brought about the unprecedented event of the Sakura personally nominating said aspirant's replacement."

Heads around the table turned for Subaru. A small, balding man near the end of the table scowled openly until Fujiwara shot him a dark glance.

Seishiro continued. "However, the identity of this replacement complicates matters. Sumeragi Subaru, current head of the Sumeragi clan, cannot possibly take control of our Tokyo office. He cannot become my subordinate, because quite independently of House politics, the Dao, whose sources he and I have been since New Year's Eve, requires balance in its sources."

Ameru's protective spells prickled on Subaru's skin. He tensed in preparation. Now.

"It is of course inconceivable to violate the Dao, and it is equally inconceivable to dismiss the Sakura's expressed wishes." Seishiro smiled. "Hence, we will continue as official partners in a joint venture!"

Chair legs all around the table scratched over the carpet. Red 'veto' signs flared across the three lit screens on the wall.

"Unacceptable!" Fujiwara stood sharply. "You can't—"

"I assume all of you got the January memo about the revitalization of the Dao," Seishiro said calmly into the turmoil. "At least, you all signed for it." His gesture covered the whole room as well as the screens on the wall, but he looked straight at Fujiwara when he continued, "Nobody can deny that the Dao has taken hold. And it is unknown whether or not its sources are still required. Therefore..." Seishiro took off his glasses and folded them neatly. "Whoever voted for my elimination *spiritually endangered the state!*"

There was dead silence from the monitors. For the first time, even Fujiwara appeared shaken. *No*, Subaru corrected his assessment, *scared*. The spells on his skin no longer tingled. The magical attention irritating them had turned elsewhere, had... evaporated in very palpable fright. These people knew what it meant to be hunted.

"However," Seishiro continued amiably, "I consider it unfeasible to deprive Japan of half of its spiritual defense in times as troubled as these. Therefore I will adjourn your execution *sine die*." He put his glasses back on.

Cautious relief rippled around the table. Fujiwara began to smile and sat down again, while Seishiro studied them pointedly. "Given the situation, I'm sure you agree *wholeheartedly* that a repetition of this 'mistake' has to be prevented at all costs. Therefore, we will cooperate with the Sumeragi within the re-established government sub-department for onmyojutsu, effective immediately. The Onmyo-ryo will have its main office here in this building. Sub-offices will be installed in our facilities in Osaka, Sapporo and Naha." Seishiro glanced briefly at one of the scrambled screens. "Due to its special status, the Korean section is not affected.

"The Ministry and the NPSC have been informed. The necessary building modifications are scheduled to start next week and will be finished by the end of Golden Week. I expect your full cooperation or the adjournment will be void." He indicated Subaru, calling him forward. "Sumeragi-san."

Subaru's pulse flew at the malevolent attention suddenly directed at him again, but he'd done this in front of his own people, people he cared about. He could do it here.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he began when he reached the table to take the empty chair at Seishiro's right. "Given the situation as it is, I would like to stress that my people and I have no interest whatsoever in your business and work." He waited for that to settle before he continued, "I mean no offense when I say that our definition of spiritual cleanliness is not easily compatible with the onmyojutsu practiced by your clan. However—" he looked first at Fujiwara, then at the three lit screens on the wall, and finally the people gathered around the broad table. "—the spiritual situation created last year no longer allows laypersons to assess the nature of our cases properly. Mistakes have happened within the respective ministries directing us. What we will form here is a coordination office to assign incoming spiritual cases to your *or* my people, and that will be as much involvement with our respective work as we're going to see."

"Excluding cases of significant doubt," Seishiro added.

"If there are any questions...?" Subaru studied the silent group of people in front of him.

Seishiro beside him shifted in his chair. "None? Good. Then we're d—"

A man in his forties raised his hand. "Kurotaka, risk assessment," he introduced himself briskly to Subaru before he continued toward Seishiro, "How will the cooperation be evaluated in terms of success?"

"A valid point," Seishiro conceded. "Recent months have seen an increasing number of cases assigned to us which had to be redirected to the Sumeragi behind the scenes. And I'm discounting cases we executed although exorcism was probably still possible. This number, indicating a waste of time, money, and lives, has to drop significantly."

"What about cooperation cases?" Fujiwara asked with a small smile, obviously guessing at what was to come. "You excluded cases of doubt from the separate work."

"Indeed." Seishiro opened the leather folder in front of him. "To address this, I am reporting on the successful elimination of a long-term spiritual threat to Japan: the Emperor's Murderer has been summoned, banished, and given to the Sakura yesterday in the Kokyo East Gardens. This is the first case solved in cooperation with the Sumeragi. You'll find a full report in the dossiers in front of you."

It was almost midnight when they finally closed the door to Seishiro's spacious office behind them. The wide front of floor-to-ceiling windows gave a spectacular view of the lit Kokyo. Even now cars filled the Uchibori-dori below. Beams of light created by their headlights, flitted over the ceiling of the dark office. The only other illumination was provided by the bluish spotlights on three silver frames on the wall opposite the windows. Each held a newspaper front page — Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri Shimbun, dating from March 21, 1995, showcasing the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway.

"A reminder of the cost of failure," Seishiro said behind Subaru.

Subaru looked back at him. "You investigated Aum Shinrikyo?"

"Yes. The government knew since June 1994 that they were playing with Sarin."

"But you couldn't stop them..." He recalled long hours spent in heavy protection gear in the subway tunnels.

"I got the case on March 17." A lighter flicked in the dark. Seishiro's face was briefly illuminated by its flame. Then only the red dot of the glowing tobacco and a first waft of smoke remained.

"It's not healthy," Subaru commented. "You told me that."

"I've got a green lung." Seishiro chuckled. "And you didn't care."

"I did," Subaru corrected quietly. "I still do."

"Probably you shouldn't."

"Probably not," Subaru agreed. He went over to the windows. Outside, the lit Kokyo gleamed white in the darkness of the park that had seen his ancestor's final demise and Mariko-san's revelations. It seemed a lifetime ago. It wasn't even yesterday. He was the head of his house. He should care about doing the right thing. He rested his bandaged palm against the window pane. Whom was he deceiving?

In the cold glass he saw Seishiro discarding his just-lit cigarette in the crystal ashtray on the desk and taking something from one of the drawers. "Subaru-kun." The tone was low, sensual, sending a shiver down Subaru's spine. The scent of Sakura hung in the air. This was no longer about smoking. Or caring. "Come here."

Or doing the right thing. Subaru turned his back to the Kokyo. Seishiro didn't reach out. He didn't have to. Subaru went willingly.

Seishiro pulled him close. "This *is* after the meeting."

Subaru's breath hitched as teeth scraped over the pulse in his throat. The edge of the desk pressed into his rear. He dug his hands — bandaged and whole — into Seishiro's hair. His turtleneck was pushed up. He felt Seishiro's fingertips trailing over his body, tracing the spells still inked on his skin. The sigil at his lowest tanden flared. There was too much cloth between them—

Seishiro opened his pants. Subaru kicked his off when he was shoved onto the desk. He slung his legs around lean hips, felt hard, polished wood cool against his bare back. Something wet was squeezed into him, followed by—

The hot body above him, pressing him down, taking him in sharp thrusts intensified by the unyielding surface beneath him. The brush of an open shirt over sweating skin, the heat of the body above him, *inside* him... Skin and silk. Sakura. Seishiro. *Mine!*

The thought echoed in the spirit world, shook roots and branches alike, and the strained fabric between the worlds tore...

~::~::~~

CLAMP Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
April 20, 2000 — 00:47 [Thursday]

"Yes, Saturday morning." Imonoyama Nokoru confirmed, suppressing a yawn, as the door to his office opened quietly. A slight irregularity of the steps and the faint clack of a walking stick revealed the identity of his late night visitor even before Suoh came into view. Nokoru raised his hand in silent greeting, while telling Ijyuin on the phone, "Come the night before. I'll make sure everything goes smoothly. Until then." He disconnected the heavily scrambled line and leaned back in his chair, exhausted.

"You look horrible, Kaicho," Suoh said as he sat down in one of the armchairs in front of the desk.

Nokoru sighed. "I'm getting old. I can no longer pull all-nighters without having to pay for it."

"Don't bother pretending you're here to catch up on your paperwork," Suoh asked, good-humored. "We both know you still owe some from elementary school."

"Please," Nokoru rolled with his eyes. "I caught up with the red tape from junior high two months ago." He lost the fight with another yawn.

Suoh's dark eyes glittered. "So, who's the lucky one to leave you worn like this?"

"Seishiro."

"*What!?*" Suoh barked, almost leaping from his perch. "You slept with—?!"

"I most assuredly did not!" Nokoru protested. "What makes you think such nonsense?"

"You just said—"

"I said that I had a sleepless night because of him," Nokoru exclaimed, exasperated. "Not that I slept with him!" He slumped back in his chair. "I just never thought him to be—"

"What? The Sakurazukamori?" Suoh snorted.

"Ah bah!" Nokoru waved it aside. "Not that. Who he is."

"Sorry?"

"Akira's uncle."

Suoh stared at him. "Say that again."

"Akira's uncle. And I'm not joking, Suoh. Akechi-sensei showed me the DNA profile. He's an Ijyuin descendant without a doubt."

"I need to sit down," Suoh muttered.

"You are sitting already," Nokoru reminded him.

"Then I need to *lie* down." Suoh groaned as if in pain. "Sei *is*..."

"The first real trace of Akechi's and Ijyuin's missing father, yes."

"They'll never let it go."

"Now do you see why I've been getting no sleep recently?" Nokoru huffed. "I've been making arrangements for a meeting between them and Sumeragi-san this weekend."

~::~::~~

Edogawa-ku, Tokyo,  
06:06

The one who once hunted the power of god allowed himself a deep, satisfied smile. He'd awoken to consciousness almost six hours ago and was still lucid, still in control of this body. He could have done countless things, but right now, he preferred sitting here and watching the night creep over and out of the shrine yard. Wishes had whispered past him all through the night, though they were becoming tangled these days, blurred and convoluted. At first, he'd thought it was because of the shrine and the constant interference of the one who wielded the power of god — and played depressed brat instead — but by now he was sure it was something inside himself.

For the first time in this year that hadn't been meant to happen, his fingertips didn't come away bloody when he trailed them down his cheek. When he looked into a mirror as Fuma, he saw a pale white scar in his skin.

He growled. His powers were fading. Kamui's powers were fading as well.

Fulfilling Kamui's wish had become impossible, and regarding his own wish...

"*And what is your wish?*" The Sumeragi had asked him in the old reality.

"*Only Kamui can fulfill my wish,*" he had replied, and he had been wrong.

They all had new wishes now, and while Kamui's remained impossible, fulfilling Sumeragi's was going to be the perfect way of getting back at Sakurazuka for betraying their purpose.

He who once hunted the power of god leaned back, staring at the sun slowly rising behind the old trees lining the shrine compound. Another dawn in the year that hadn't been meant to happen.

"Fuma?" Kamui, sleep-drunk, asked behind him. "What are you—?"

"No... not solely." He brushed over his cheek, felt scab under his fingertips, threw back his head and laughed. He watched Kamui gulp at the gesture and there was that impulse to pin him to the floor, slam— He shook it off. A swarm of birds took to the sky, their wings beating the air loudly.  
The earth grumbled. A minor quake. Probably a three on the Shindo scale.

## XX — Family Matters

*The Sakura trembled from the aftershocks of the awakening that rattled the very fabric of spiritual and physical world alike. The old order was shattered; unbeknownst to Amaterasu's fast living children, the Age of the Dao had begun. The balance of power had irrevocably tilted.*

*The Tree spread its spirit crown wide, watching over its two Sakurazukamori, curled around each other, oblivious in their sleep.*

Ueno-Sakuragi-cho, Tokyo,  
April 20, 2000 [Thursday]

It was almost ten when Subaru dragged himself out of bed for a late breakfast. Water simmered on the stove when he entered the kitchen. His tea set stood, ready for use, on the kitchen counter. Subaru looked at it, then opted for coffee instead — very hot, very black, with just a hint of sugar — and eased himself down opposite Seishiro with a steaming mug and a plate with fresh toast. Eased, because desks weren't just uncomfortable the day after. They were downright painful. His spine felt as if he had a bruise on every single vertebra from neck to bottom. Next time would be in bed, he decided while pouring honey onto his toast. Or at least somewhere soft and cushioned. Or Seishiro would be the one on the bottom! Subaru glanced at the wall of paper in front of him, skimming the headlines. "Today's last page is rather uninteresting," he commented.

"Looks like Shiibatani's cover held." Seishiro folded the paper in half and tossed it onto the kitchen stool beside Subaru, who watched the pile of discarded papers wobble and a couple of pages flutter down to the floor. Seishiro shrugged and sipped from his coffee. "Nothing about the events in the East Gardens."

"That's a relief." Subaru drank from his own cup. The ink of the spells on his skin had faded a little and was now a natural, henna-red brown. It would take days, if not weeks, for it to fade completely, leaving the spells active to some degree — especially when Seishiro gave in to temptation and traced them again. Glancing at Ameru's delicate penmanship on his bare arms, Subaru wondered what to make of the slight tingle and brilliant flash it had caused. Sumeragi protection, Sakurazuka gift... what did that mean in terms of the Dao? Another sip of his coffee.

On the other hand, it certainly hadn't stopped them yesterday. Yesterd— *The report!* Subaru's mug hit the table top with an audible bang. Pushing his plate towards Seishiro, he made room for his writing pad still lying on the windowsill. Last time's neglect. He shook his head, pulled out a sheet and hastily wrote the preamble. If he hurried, he'd still be able to fax it—

"You object to me reading the paper and now you sit there and scribble?" Seishiro complained.

"It's the report for elder Makoto," Subaru said without looking up. "I forgot about it yesterday."

Seishiro shrugged. "What can she do? She's back in Kyoto."

"You're naive," Subaru told him. "If I haven't sent that report by noon, elder Makoto will do well worse than burning my shikif— *fuck!*" He dropped his pen and — despite his aching back — ran for the phone. He glanced at the bedside clock while the call went out. It was well past ten. Even express, it would be a close call. The fifth ringing already. Six—

=Sumeragi Estate, public relations office. How may we help—=

"Yimura-san?" Subaru interrupted her. "This is Sumeragi Subaru. Please connect me with my grandmother. It's urgent."

=I will fetch her immediately, Sumeragi-sama,= his distant cousin answered on the spot. =Please hold.= A click and the soft melody of temple bells played on the other end. It would take minutes or more to get his grandmother out to the gate house holding their small public relations office with the heavily warded telephone. Subaru sighed. The inconvenient arrangement was in effect since before Hokuto's death. The result of his experience with the dial Q2 hotline. He looked down at the phone system beside Seishiro's laptop. The device sat comfortably on the desk and had more features than he had cared to learn. An extension was even right on the night stand. No wards, no banning field, yet safe because the line to the house was scrambled. He wondered how he could convince the elders to install something similar. He glanced at the clock again. At the moment, he'd even settle for a cordless phone that could be brought to his grandmother instead of relying on her to wheel out to—

=Subaru-san? Have you been harmed?= His grandmother sounded shaken, if not out of breath.

"No, grandmother." He hurried to assure her. "Please don't worry. I—"

=Do you require ritual cleansing?=  
=

*Rit*—?! "No, I did wash myself." He abstained from adding 'even behind the ears', "but I require a purified shikifuku by the end of tomorrow."

=Tomorrow?= Her stern voice held a well-honed tone of disapproval.

"I know it's on short notice, grandmother, but I have a memorial service scheduled on Saturday morning. There's not enough time for the preparations and obtaining and purifying a new shikifuku."

"It is the virtue of an onmyoji to be prepared for his work," she quoted the old adage in a brittle voice. "As head of the house you are expected to abide by that."

"Indeed, grandmother," Subaru replied, clamping down on his temper. "However, I expect *you* to kindly take into account that if elder Makoto hadn't burned my shikifuku after the exorcism, I wouldn't be in this quandary to begin with."

=Subaru-san, I pray that you still realize that your former shikifuku was stained beyond redemption. Makoto-san reported it soaked with blood.=

"Which is why I require a new one," Subaru stated with strained patience. "Or do you want me to go to Isetan and perform a memorial service in jeans and t-shirt?"

Shocked silence.

"I thought so," he concluded. "Please have it sent express. Thank you for your help." He hung up before she could reply anything further and briefly closed his eyes. There was no denying it: Seishiro had a bad influence on his behavior.

"A memorial service?" said bad influence asked from the bedroom door. "For whom?"

Subaru drew a deep breath. He should have said something yesterday. He should have rescued his shikifuku. He should have held his temper. "Kotori-chan. Imonoyama-san asked me to hold the service."

"Did it occur to you that the Kamui — *both* of them — are likely going to be there?" Seishiro inquired frostily.

Subaru looked up, facing him squarely. "I know for a fact that they will attend!"

CLAMP Campus, Tokyo,  
Imonoyama Mansion  
April 22, 2000 — 08:33 [Saturday]

Subaru winced as he set the last bow, securing the obi. The new shikifuku hadn't yet softened from use and tying the crisp cloth put strain on his injured palm. His hand was still sore, probably it had been too early to leave the cut uncovered, but he didn't want the questions an obvious injury would raise in the audience. Seishiro wouldn't care about their accusations, but he wasn't happy about the service to begin with. And loving Kotori-chan deserved better than having a confrontation on her first year obit. Mono-kun's sister deserved better.

Sister. Subaru clamped his right firmly around the prayer beads as he laid them around his shoulders. The ritual dagger felt weird at his side. It was his usual blade, wrapped in white silk, tied with red thread. It hadn't seen blood, but it was too light after having carried a wakizashi. *Susumu's* wakizashi. His left palm throbbed. His cheek—

Hokuto had said, "*It's my fault.*" The dreamlike memory from his catatonia and the sensation of her death from Seishiro's maboroshi overlapped. The touch of her hand on his cheek before she'd taken his shikifuku and left felt exactly like her touching Seishiro's cheek while her blood flowed to fuel a spell she shouldn't have known to begin with.

"*She asked.*"

*And you didn't say no*, Subaru returned in his thoughts. *Why?* But he was sure Seishiro wasn't aware of the answer to that. Hokuto on the other hand...

"*I want you to truly live,*" she'd told him. "*I can't let you die.*" And, "*I want Subaru and you to live...*" The latter to Seishiro while her life was pouring out of her around his hand. "*A person who can't fall in love doesn't exist.*"

Subaru brushed the fingertips of his left hand over the cheek she'd touched all those years ago. Yes. Hokuto had known what he himself had figured out merely days ago. He closed his eyes, pressed his injured palm against his cheek in mimicry of her final touch.

*I'm trying, big sister*, he silently told her memory. *We are trying.*—

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Subaru glanced at the clock. No, the memorial service wouldn't start for another thirty minutes. Who—?

"Sumeragi-san?" Takamura asked. "Are you decent?"

No, he wasn't decent. He was mentally talking with his dead sister about his life with her murderer while he was supposed to spiritually prepare the memorial service for Kotori-chan, who'd actually been killed by her brother. He was anything *but* decent.

Takamura knocked again. "I'm sorry to disturb your preparations, but here's somebody you need to see."

So, the other decent. Subaru shook his head about himself. Corrupted. He was definitely corrupted. "Yes, Takamura-san. Please do come in."

"Akechi-sensei." Subaru asked, surprised, at the sight of the doctor standing beside Takamura. "Is something wrong with Kamui?"

"Good morning, Sumeragi-san," Akechi greeted him politely. "Kamui-kun is recovering well as far as I know. My visit doesn't concern him." The doctor glanced back at Takamura.

"I'll make sure you aren't disturbed." Takamura nodded gravely at Subaru, then said toward Akechi, "Please don't take long. I can spot him, but I can't stop him these days."

"Stop whom?" Subaru asked, alarmed.

"Sakurazuka."

"Why—?" Subaru began, but Takamura closed the door already.

"I'm sorry for causing you concern," Akechi apologized quietly. "It's because I'm here because of Sakurazuka-san," he explained. "I— Do you have any information about his family background, specifically his father?"

*His father? Seishiro's father?* Subaru blinked. "The Sakurazuka are a secretive house, Akechi-sensei," he answered cautiously. "Why do you ask?"

"I have reason to believe that Sakurazuka Seishiro may be my younger brother."

"That's impossible." Subaru shook his head. Yes, there was a certain similarity in size and demeanor, as far as he knew Seishiro had worn some of Akechi's clothes when he'd stayed injured in Imonoyama's house last Winter, but to think that a reason to—

"I have evidence." The doctor looked clearly discomfited as he continued. "I ran a test for paternal relationship on one of his blood samples. It came away positive. There is an above 99.8 per cent chance that he and I are paternal half-brothers."

Subaru felt cold. This was a recipe for disaster. He had to stop this. "And why did you make the test in the first place, sensei? If Sakurazuka-san requested it, we wouldn't be talking here, would we?"

Akechi averted his eyes. "I am aware of my crimes, Sumeragi-san. But the result remains."

*And may get you killed,* Subaru added silently, aloud he said, "I can't condone this unprofessional conduct. Your business relies on integrity even more than mine."

"Understandable."

Subaru jumped at the cool voice from behind him and froze at the sight of the man standing in the doorway. "Ijyuin Shigetoshi. I'm Akechi's — and I guess Sakurazuka's — oldest brother and the head of the house. Please excuse this secrecy, but like Imonoyama I'm not a man you should be friends with." He crossed the room and leaned against the edge of the sink. "I assume you know now why Akechi felt compelled to run the offending test."

Subaru swallowed. Ijyuin could have been Seishiro's twin... if not for his dark eyes and the greyish hair at his temples, still— Twenty years from now, Seishiro would look like him. It was scary. *Deadly* if he didn't stop them. Subaru straightened. "Be that as it may, Ijyuin-san, but—"

"We don't want to waste your time, Sumeragi-san," Ijyuin interrupted him. "Sakurazuka Seishiro may know about our lost father. We have every intention to learn what happened to him."

"Please understand," Akechi added quietly, "our father went missing thirty-five years ago and we've been searching for him all this time. Seishiro— Sakurazuka-san is the first trace we ever found."

Subaru feared he had a very clear idea of what had happened to the man if he really was Seishiro's father and inquiring about it might bring a similar fate upon his sons. Two of his sons. Two of his three— His head reeled and he sat down heavily on the stool before the mirror. "And what do you want me to do?" he asked woodenly. He could hardly go to Seishiro and tell him there were two brothers of his out here looking for him.

"How best to breach the subject with him?" Akechi prompted.

"Don't," Subaru said without thinking.

"That is not an option," Ijyuin said sharply. "This is not a question of 'if', only of 'how!'"

"Sumeragi-san." Akechi laid a calming hand on his brother's arm. "It honors you that you're trying to protect him, but we do not wish him harm. We are aware that this kind of surprise might pose a problem for him."

*It's not his problem, it's his solution.* Subaru looked from Akechi to Ijyuin, whose dark brown eyes were sharp, intense. Subaru realized, they would be intimidating if he weren't that used to confronting Seishiro. The doctor seemed kinder than his brother, but was clearly just as ruthless. No, Subaru realized, he wouldn't be able to talk them out of this, he could only hope to prevent the worst.

Subaru drew a deep breath, composing himself before he searched Akechi's gaze and held it, noting the doctor's obvious discomfiture at his challenge almost with relief. "If you confront him about this, you better have a very good explanation for that test of yours, doctor. Seishiro was a Dragon of Earth last year. I'm certain you do know what that means. Keep it in mind when speaking with him."

"I'm aware of my transgression," Akechi acknowledged, receiving a comforting touch from his brother in return. "But for the sake of the family—"

"Family' is not a positive term in his book," Subaru interrupted him. "In fact, referring to him as your relative might be a mistake. His clan is very protective and interest in their affairs is not welcomed." *And deadly.*

Ijyuin studied him thoughtfully. The intense scrutiny sent an unwelcome shiver down Subaru's spine. "Then what do you suggest?" he asked. "What shall we do?"

*Forget about it and run,* Subaru thought desperately, but he knew neither Ijyuin nor Akechi would accept this most sensible solution. A sharp pain raced through his hand. He'd dug his nails into the barely healed cut in his palm, drawing blood. He only hoped Seishiro hadn't caught that through the marks. He—

"Sumeragi-san?" Ijyuin pressed.

Subaru gathered himself up. "Stay with the plain truth. You've been searching for your father since he disappeared thirty-five years ago and you'd like to ask whether he has any information about the whereabouts of his own father as there may be a connection. Add nothing else. Imply nothing else. He may deny it at first, even shrug it off. But he might come back to you later — on his own terms."

He drew a deep breath, then looked straight at Akechi. "And don't tell him that you specifically targeted him with that test. If you have to say anything about that, tell him you routinely test every sample you get."

"I shall confess an even bigger crime?" Akechi asked, shocked.

"It's a bigger crime, but a smaller offense to him. If he knows you targeted him, he will consider you a threat. And believe me," — Subaru looked at them both — "you do *not* want that."

There was deadly silence in the room after his last words. Ijyuin kept looking at him, but said nothing. Akechi appeared rattled. Subaru only hoped, it would make him cautious.

"Can you get us an appointment with him?" Ijyuin asked eventually. "The Sakurazuka have an office downtown, but this is hardly a business matter."

"Make the contact through Imonoyama," Subaru replied tiredly. "The chairman is less close to him, so your approach through him will appear less significant. And give him time. Don't approach him today. Right now is a rather strenuous time for us."

*Us? Did I really say 'us' aloud?* Subaru wondered, noticing that Ijyuin's expression had softened.

Another knock on the door. "Sumeragi-san?" Takamura. "It's time for the ceremony."

"I'm coming," he answered, getting to his feet. He bowed at Ijyuin and Akechi-sensei and left the room, patting the back of his shikifuku in a likely futile attempt to ease the wrinkles left behind from his sitting down.

"You appear shaken," Takamura remarked when they left the house.

Subaru sighed. "What makes you think so?"

"Ijyuin tends to have that effect on people."

Was he shaken? Subaru asked himself. No, he was worse. Kotori-chan's memorial service was only minutes ahead and he was the opposite of composed. The elders— *Grandmother* would be appalled.

When he looked up, he found Takamura looking at him shrewdly. "Or was it the matter itself?"

"I'm afraid that's confidential."

"I thought so." Takamura nodded. He froze for a moment, listened attentively to a skin-colored button in his ear. "I'm afraid there's no time for recovery. The Kamui just passed the main gate." He started down the stairs with a visible limp. "I don't want Kaicho near them unprotected."

"Is your wound bothering you?" Subaru asked.

"Not more than usual," was the terse reply, accentuated by an especially jarring tap of the walking stick on the stones.

"I'm sorry," Subaru said quietly.

"You aren't responsible for my condition," Takamura corrected gruffly. "I chose to protect his back. And I chose to turn down your help afterwards for reasons that had nothing to do with you."

"I know." Subaru's zori sank into the wet earth as they left the paved area. "Yet it would have been my duty to help. As it is my duty to help now, if I can." *If I am allowed to. If I'm composed—*

"That won't be necessary," Takamura told him, sounding as if he'd bitten on something decidedly bitter. "The wound is healing properly since—"

"Since?"

"Sei ignored my objections."

Subaru stopped dead. "Sei— what?"

"Treated the wound," Takamura admitted grimly. They were now under the canopy of the park trees. The changing shadows obscured his expression. "Let's stop beating about the bush. I know what he is and there's no love lost between us. But having him skewered on a holy sword after all this time didn't sit right with me, either." He snorted. "I guess it was the same with him in return, but that doesn't mean I want him anywhere near Kaicho in this mess they concocted! So, please come." He gestured for Subaru to resume walking.



"He won't hurt Imonoyama-san," Subaru said quietly. "He likes their game too much."

"I know." Takamura nodded as the grave tree came into view. "But I won't bet Kaicho's life any more on a game than on the Twin Star's good will."

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CLAMP Campus, Tokyo  
Grave of Mono Kotori

There was a history between those two, Seishiro decided. An attraction not yet acted upon, though. Leaning comfortably propped against the grave tree's trunk, he watched, amused, how the windmaster held the folding chair for Kasumi after Nokoru had shown them their seats. Aoki's wife was either very lenient or as adept at spotting subterfuge as her husband was at hiding attraction.

Nokoru, returning to his position beside the altar, gave him a wry smile. In a somber grey suit with minimal black trimmings, he was an unusual sight. Even the trademark fan dangling from his left wrist seemed monochrome black. Seishiro wondered idly how many of the mourning guests currently watching him with carefully veiled wariness realized that the chief mourner much closer to them had a tessens at the ready. Not to speak of the artfully hidden earpiece and mike, and the lethal ornament by Heckler and Koch concealed under the jacket in the back. No, Suoh was *not* happy about this event.

Actually, Seishiro admitted privately, neither was he.

He watched the monk hovering over the Ise — now, 'girl' was probably not a fitting description for her any longer. Judged by Arisugawa's fussing, Subaru's suspicion regarding her condition had been spot-on. He wouldn't wonder if they disappeared back to safety right after the service.

The wide crown over Seishiro's head moved in a breeze. Drops left by an early morning rain fell from the leaves. An extra-large one found his collar. He should have tied Subaru to the bed and harvested his ch'i instead of agreeing to the folly of a secret memorial service for the Twin Star's first victim! The tall ash guarding the remains shook with mirth at his sullen thought, releasing more drops to fall on the altar, the grave, and him.

An investigation of the girl's death would have put Destiny's chosen ones in trouble, so someone had faked a death certificate and a cremation to appease authorities. Kind of ironic... The Dragon of Earth produced the body, and Heaven hid it in the woods. If that wasn't teamwork, what was?

Seishiro straightened. In front of him, Nokoru touched his earpiece, listening. He queried his marks, found Subaru near. So the Kamui were on the grounds already. Something white flashed under the trees and Nokoru's black lacquer fan snapped open with a metallic click. Sparks of sunlight flashed off its sharpened steel spokes. Subaru rang the bell to call the priest forward the moment Mono, wearing the white of a mourning relative, and a rather hollow-eyed Kamui reached the chairs.

Seishiro narrowed his eyes as they sat down in the front row, ignoring him. Something was... off, for lack of a better word. There was some shuffling in the audience when the monk insisted on sitting between Arashi and the Kamui, and Kasumi, having covered her flamboyant hair with a black lace scarf, insisted on welcoming Kamui anyway. The windmaster looked decidedly unhappy about it. Mono gave him an amused look over the edge of his teashades—

Green teashades that had seen Shibuya fall, while the Twin Star had invited him to chocolate chip icecream. That wasn't Mono.

Subaru's hand brushed Seishiro's as he passed him on the way to the altar. The bell chimed again. Nokoru clapped his hands and bowed deeply. Seishiro kept the Twin Star in sight, offensive fuda at the ready in his sleeve. The grave tree touching his shoulder had stopped radiating mirth. Something else whispered in its wide crown when Subaru, his back to the audience — to the *Twin Star!* — lit the lamp of wisdom in the center of the altar. A sharp gust of wind threatened to scatter the fruits and flowers chosen to represent the five elements and their colors. The candles of Sun and Moon flanking the lamp shook. Somebody needed a reminder.

He crossed the distance to the altar in five long strides and put the flame of his gold-plated lighter to the wick of the Moon candle at the time when Subaru's burning rush lit the candle of the Sun. The wind died instantaneously and he returned soundlessly to his position under the tree. Behind him, Subaru, doubtlessly bowing deeply to the gods, announced the girl's funeral name and began his incantation.

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The tension in the audience had been palpable from the beginning. The Kamui, especially Mono-kun, flashed with power. Subaru had been very aware of them since he entered the clearing. The grave tree guarding Kotori's remains seemed to shake in their presence. He'd planned for a short ceremony, calling to mind Kotori's memory and, given her clairvoyance, the transcendent wisdom of the deceased. But then Seishiro

had come forward, lighting the candle dedicated to Tsukiyomi with a cigarette lighter. A tightening in the marks had been all the warning Subaru got when choreography and dedication of the service were drastically altered. What had begun as a primarily Buddhist memorial was now firmly turned to the Dao, an aggressive, active Dao, concerned with the here and now and not the enlightenment of the deceased. Subaru deftly switched from the planned Heart Sutra to the Amithaba Sutra, telling Kotori about the wonders awaiting her in Anraku, repeatedly calling the Buddha by name.

This was a much longer ceremony than he'd planned and his throat felt raw by the time he clapped his hands and bowed a last time to the Buddha and the deceased. The spiritual power of the Kamui at his back felt dulled, but he was hyper-aware of Seishiro and the whiff of Sakura wafting around the grave tree. There was a quiet, almost joyful presence lingering between the tall ash's leaves when Imonoyama rang the bell, officially ending the ceremony. Grateful, Subaru bowed again. Yes, despite everything, he had done well. He drew a deep breath and met Seishiro's eyes briefly across the altar between them. He frowned at the black ofuda aglow between Seishiro's fingers. What—

"I see you made good use of my warning," a calm, yet slightly flippant voice said behind him.

Subaru turned. "Kuzuki," Seishiro said by way of greeting, thus telling him who the slender man in front of him was.

"I've come to deliver two messages," Kuzuki said towards Imonoyama, still holding the chief mourner's position beside the altar. At Imonoyama's small nod, Kuzuki turned for Kamui and the smirking Mono beside him. "The deceased asked me in her dying dream to tell you that she loves you both — despite her end in the Final Year."

"You were supposed to predict the Earth's future," Mono returned, "not to peep into my sister's dreams!"

Kuzuki didn't flinch under the reprimand. "Her dreams were of interest. She foresaw correctly that the future hadn't been decided yet when she died." Silence followed the cold statement. A breeze moved Kuzuki's pale short-cropped hair and the black scarf with which Karen had covered hers.

The Twin Star snorted. "And the second message?"

"Is not for you." Kuzuki turned back to Subaru saying, after a brief glance at Seishiro, "Your sister wants both of you to know that there's no such thing as never."

"And no such thing as ever," Seishiro said flippantly, coming forward around the altar. "Like having the last word with Hokuto-chan."

"You didn't have the last word even when you killed her," Subaru told him brusquely. "So stop pretending you did!" He bowed his respect to Kuzuki. "Please accept my heartfelt thanks for my sister's message and your warning. I feel deeply indebted to you."

"Don't mention it." Kuzuki shrugged. "I could have called earlier."

"But you also didn't call later," Subaru said solemnly. "If I may ask, Kuzuki-san... how did you come to know my sister?"

The yumemi studied him thoughtfully. "She entered my dreams," he said finally, "shared hers with me when she found mine too bleak to bear. She brought... laughter. Exuberance. *Real dreaming.*"

"Into your dreams."

"Yes."

Subaru, lacking words, bowed again.

"Don't you mind your boyfriend flirting with my ex-dreamseer?" Mono sauntered over.

"Not at all." Seishiro brushed his fingers along his jaw, showing off the marks cut into his hands, and smirked. "He's quite aware that Kuzuki's appeal can't match mine."

"And here I thought you cut his palm to keep his hands off potential rivals after he'd wrapped himself in protective spells to keep your hands off him."

Seishiro laughed. "Your perception is lacking. Whose magic do you think fuels those spells written all over—"

"I warned you—" Kamui pushed between them, crackling with power.

"I closed my hand around a blade in an exorcism four days ago," Subaru corrected calmly, stopping Kamui in his tracks. "Seishiro had nothing to do with it."

"He didn't?" Mono inquired, standing entirely too close for Subaru's tastes. "How *odd.*" His expression hardened as he looked at Seishiro. "I still have to thank you for trapping me in this reality."

"Do you?" Seishiro arched a brow in mild interest. "You also still owe me an icecream."

"That was forfeited when you betrayed the Earth's cause."

"So now you plan to fulfill my Wish — whatever you think it is — in the most gruesome manner possible?"

"No," Mono laughed. "I can do better than that. I will fulfill *Sumeragi's.*"

Subaru froze, thoughts racing at what Mono might mean.

"You think you can?" Seishiro actually sounded amused. He fetched a packet of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered a smoke to Subaru, who declined, still shaken. "Didn't you say it was something you cannot grant?" He took one for himself.

"Wishes change." Mono snickered. Seishiro lit his cigarette on the flame of the Moon candle. "Worlds change as well, but my destiny is still foreordained and this body is young and healthy and will have a very long life." Adding with a serene smile, "Forcing the two of you to keep watch, while getting older and older and—"

"Spiritual power doesn't weaken with age," Seishiro returned coldly. "We will be there."

"Perfect!" Mono put his arm around Kamui's shoulder. "Let's go."

Kamui shrugged him off, reaching for Subaru's hand. "I'm not done here." Subaru winced, when his fingers touched the sore cut in his palm. "Promise me to tell me, if he ever tries something funny," Kamui said seriously. "I will stop him."

Mono chuckled. "Don't promise things you—"

"Do you want a kick where it counts?" Kamui snapped at him.

"Do you want to make a fool of yourself?" Mono returned sweetly.

"Don't worry." Seishiro dragged at his cigarette, completing the sentence in a cloud of smoke behind a bright glowing tip. "I'll only behave as well as he wants me to."

"Don't even try to put your character flaws on my conscience," Subaru told him dryly. "They're all yours." He met Kamui's worried expression and forced a smile. "Don't worry about me. Please take good care of yourself instead. I'll be fine."

Mono rolled his eyes. "Can we leave now? This sap might be contagious." He actually waved at them, when Kamui nodded sadly. "Be seeing you!"

Kasumi, Aoki in tow, joined them as they watched Destiny's chosen ones leave, not without Kamui freeing his arm repeatedly from Mono's grasp. "That's not the Twin Star I recall from last year," she said after Kamui and Mono had disappeared under the trees.

"No," Subaru confirmed. "But also not the Mono Fuma I know from Kamui's memories."

"Or from this January," Imonoyama added.

"I don't think this is still a possession," Subaru thought aloud, adding more firmly, "It's an amalgamation."

"The Twin Star? Softened by Mono Fuma?" Seishiro raised a brow at that.

"Something like that." Subaru nodded. "He's both. The Twin Star, but also a teenager with the body and the memories of Mono Fuma, who got his way far too often last year. There are no longer two souls, two persons."

"I don't believe Mono's soul has the power for that." Seishiro shook his head.

"I think it's the Twin Star himself," Subaru said softly. "It's *his* Wish being fulfilled."

"His *Wish*?"

"Yes." Subaru nodded. "It had begun already in the rectified time span between our fight on the bridge and the end of the year. He told me that only Kamui can fulfill his Wish. From what I saw of him, I believe it's something along the lines of Kamui acknowledging him for what he is. However, I'm concerned that he still tries to get back at us. I don't think he's softened enough to be harmless. How can us getting older be perfect for him? Onmyojutsu is gift, skill, and experience. We won't weaken with age. On the contrary. And he knows that."

"Maybe it's something about your Wish, Sumeragi-san," Imonoyama said thoughtfully. "Only you would know the answer to that."

Subaru shook his head. "It doesn't make sense. And yet he seemed almost... happy, for lack of a better word, that we continue to prevent a decision of the Final Battle."

"We will find out in time." Seishiro shrugged and crushed the rest of his cigarette under his heel. Looking at the spot where the Kamui had left, he smirked. "I think I'm going to have that icecream with him. It might prove interesting."

Subaru reached up and turned Seishiro's face firmly towards him despite their audience. "You shouldn't," he said with emphasis. "I doubt Kamui would come to save *you*."

"I don't believe the Twin Star still has the physical power to harm me," Seishiro quipped taking a step back.

"I wasn't speaking of the Twin Star."

## Epilogue

April 27, 2000 — 10:38 [Thursday]

"No, sir, reinforced oak wood will *not* suffice for the doors." Subaru's voice came from the bedroom when Seishiro closed the house door, the thick envelope holding their tickets safely stuck in his jacket's breast pocket. It had taken some convincing to get these tickets this time of the year. He allowed himself a satisfied smile as he hung up his coat. He could be *very* convincing.

"I'm sorry, material is not negotiable."

In the silence following that exasperated line, Seishiro got off his shoes.

"The standard design for government offices is irrelevant. This is a safety concern."

The sound of an also amusingly agitated voice from the other end of the line was audible by the time he reached the bedroom door. "I am aware of the building regulations for Tokyo, sir. You explained them in detail on Tuesday, but earthquakes are the least of my concerns here."

From the sound of the voice coming from the other end of the line, the architect ordered to refurbish Subaru-kun's office and the first floor going to hold the rooms of the Onmyo-ryo wasn't too happy with that.

"Yes, I declare my sole responsibility for not conforming with the building regulations," Subaru stated brusquely. "Have the form with you on Monday. Thank you." He put the receiver down. With force.

"Monday might be a problem," Seishiro remarked casually, noting satisfied the speed with which Subaru whirled round, and held up the flight tickets he just bought. "I don't think you'll make that appointment."

"And why not?" Subaru huffed, eying the tickets warily.

"Because you'll be on Okinawa." Seishiro waved the tickets.

"Okinawa?" Subaru asked in obvious disbelief.

"Yes. It's the prime holiday spot for Golden Week," Seishiro declared. "We're booked on ANA124 at 13:40 from Haneda to Naha this Saturday."

"The day after tomorrow?!" Subaru inquired. "Are you nuts?"

"No, I'm going on vacation. With you."

"In the middle of a major office restructuring?"

Seishiro pocketed the tickets again and dropped the exuberance. "I'm sure the carpenters and decorators are more than competent enough to complete the Tokyo offices on their own. Whereas I'm certain that Kyushu section will do a horrible job in complying with the Onmyo-ryo if left to their own devices. So, yes, we're going to Okinawa in the middle of our office restructuring."

Subaru sat down at the desk. "You really expect trouble there, don't you?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. Without a doubt." And a chance to acquaint Subaru with hanazake<sup>57</sup> and a certain related plum dish, but Seishiro carefully kept *that* smile off his face.

"Then we're going." Subaru sighed, checking the items on his notepad. "If I manage to explain that to grandmother and the Jichi-daijin, that is." He glanced at the clock and stood again. "And now I have to get Omi from the train station. We're going to use the kitchen, if you don't mind. And..." He drew a deep breath. "I'd like to have you around for that talk."

Seishiro nodded. "By the way, what had our architect up in arms like that? A very comfy couch to avoid excessive desk work perhaps?"

"You wish." Subaru, already heading outside, actually snorted. "Glass doors."

"Glass—" Seishiro laughed. "Kinky. I'm sure Namane-san will love our shows!"

"Against ofuda attached in passing," Subaru corrected dryly, stepping into his shoes. "And there won't be any 'shows' to begin with. I'm not an exhibitionist."

"Then we might put my inattention spells to the test." Seishiro smiled. "Right after we get back from Okinawa." Subaru closed the house door faster than usual.

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Omi drew a deep breath and touched the protective ofuda attached to the inner lining of his coat and jacket. They were on the way to one of the most tainted places on earth: the Sakurazukamori's house. Subaru-san's house.

Subaru-san, who — deep-red spells disturbingly visible on his bare arms — preceded him seemingly carefree into the maze of small streets and alleys beyond the Kototoi-dori. The grey multi-storey buildings lining the broad street were soon replaced by a hodgepodge of small homes and stores.

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<sup>57</sup> Hanazake is a special brand of Awamori (distilled rice liquor unique to Okinawa). It has an alcohol content of 60% and more (it catches fire) and is drunk straight without any watering. On Awamori: <http://sake-world.com/html/shochu-awamori.html>

Here, small front gardens held grass and flowers, sometimes even a carefully tended tree, and children played on the sidewalk. A woman swept the entrance of her wooden house and an old man carried grocery bags from a small convenience store down the street. A uniformed policeman worked on a motorbike in front of a police box, located in a single corner room of a two-family house. Surely, the Sakurazukamori wouldn't live anywhere near—

"Good morning, officer Kawashima," Subaru greeted in passing and soon afterwards turned into a quiet side-street with small homes on one side and a rough stone wall on the other. The wall was higher than their heads and stone herbs clawed into its niches, their pink and yellow flowers bobbing in the breeze. "The Yanaka cemetery," Subaru-san told him, unasked, "We're almost there," and greeted an elderly woman working in the front garden of the white-washed house at the corner. "Yoshino-san, nice to meet you. Has there been any mail for us recently?"

"I'm afraid not. The sensei— Yoshi!" A plump red-tabby cat had slunk off the grounds and angled for Subaru's legs. "You can't bother our neighbors again."

"Don't worry, Yoshino-san. Sakurazuka-sensei *loves* having Yoshi around." Omi blinked. Subaru-san looked almost mischievous. "He's got so few patients these days." He bowed politely at the elderly lady, fished a set of house keys from his pocket, and told her cat, "Come on, Yoshi. You can torment— *play with* Seishiro while I'm talking business with Omi-san here."

'*Seishiro*.' Omi swallowed, watching Subaru unlock the gate to the property wedged between the house with the cat and what looked to be an overgrown side entrance to the cemetery.

"Are you coming?" Subaru asked, holding the gate open for Omi.

The entrance was unusual, with five steps leading up from the genkan to the carpeted living area, but given the Sakurazukamori's occupation, the additional elevation was probably more than needed. The invited cat was nowhere to be seen.

"You can leave your coat over there." Subaru indicated a coat-rack next to the shoe board and Omi cautiously put his coat on a hanger, taking pains not to touch the long black leather coat already hanging there. It couldn't possibly belong to Subaru-san.

He hurried to follow as Subaru stepped out of his shoes. There were two pairs of slippers set out and he gratefully used one. Subaru ignored the other and headed up the stairs in his socks. Black socks. Fluffy.

"Tadaima!"

Omi startled when Subaru called out. The carpet was soft. The house smelled deliciously of lemon and Usukuchi sauce and—

"One paw in that bowl and you are a dead cat!"

Omi's steps faltered on the stairs while Subaru smiled, turning towards the first door on the left. "Sorry to interrupt your cooking," he said cheerfully, waving behind his back for Omi to come in, too. "This is our guest Omi-san, who took care of the mutilated ghosts in my stead."

"And spies for your grandmother."

The man Subaru-san had addressed stood at a lime green kitchen counter, cutting what looked like marinated salmon into fine slices. Omi blinked, stupefied, while Subaru answered, unperturbed, "That, too." This was—? He didn't quite recall what he had expected the Sakurazukamori — an assassin... a killer! — to look like, but he was sure his imagination hadn't involved a frilly apron depicting a cartoon penguin with a sign reading "Kiss the Cook for Dessert".

Belatedly, he dropped into a respectful bow. "Omi Tono, onmyoji associated with the Sumeragi." He tried not to contemplate that just a week ago these words to this man might have been a death sentence.

"Sakurazuka Seishiro." The knife in the Sakurazukamori's hand flashed as he put it down on the chopping block. Omi winced, earning himself an amused smile. "Don't worry. I never take work home. It ruins the schedule and the carpets."

"And Omi isn't work!" Subaru stated firmly, giving the Sakurazukamori a stern look before offering Omi a seat at the polished kitchen table. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience." Omi noticed, startled, that Subaru-san actually bowed to him. "It's just that—"

"His office still needs a paint job," the Sakurazukamori, having returned to preparing his salmon, said without looking up from the task.

"—and an exorcism," Subaru added dryly.

"That, too," Sakurazuka conceded. Omi, in the process of sitting down with his briefcase safely on his knees, winced slightly. Surely, Subaru-san wouldn't— "But don't put getting rid of Romiro's abysmal taste too far down on your to do list," the Sakurazukamori continued, placing salmon slices and chopped vegetables in a pot lined with konbu. "He wasn't the company's sunshine on the best of days."

"A position I don't intend to fill, either," Subaru retaliated and Omi wondered if it would be opportune to ask for a reschedule of their meeting, giving the rather private nature of the exchange spinning on around him. He wouldn't want to intrude— "I apologize for the impertinence of my colleague, not the location." Subaru-san claimed the chair opposite him, propping his elbows on the table. "I take it the exorcisms went well?"

"Yes." Omi nodded, relieved to focus on business. Sakurazuka at the stove closed the lid of the pot and cranked up the gas. "Two of the locations may require a second check-up, though."

Glad that he had taken the extra-time last night to neatly sort and document the cases, he took the files for Subaru-san from his briefcase. After a wary glance at the table top between them, placed the files on the lid of his ofuda-lined briefcase instead. He could hardly perform a salt purification in front of the Sakurazukamori! "The cases in Shibuya and Shinjuku were straightforward work," he summarized, pushing the briefcase over the table for Subaru-san to read.

Subaru snatched the file off the case and placed it squarely on the table in front of him.

Omi swallowed, embarrassed, and continued. "Public locations. The bodies were found early and the passers-by were adults, focused on their specific tasks—"

"Shopping and sex," the Sakurazukamori commented dryly, coming to stand beside Subaru-san and read over his shoulder. "Or a combination of both. Doesn't leave much mental capacity for a spiritual tainting."

"Indeed, sir." Omi cleared his throat nervously, noting that Subaru-san apparently didn't mind the co-reader.

"The other locations?" Subaru prompted quietly.

"Yes." Omi hurried to open the next file, holding the meticulous notes and annotated snapshots of the location he'd made prior and after his work in the hope of making a good impression to Subaru-san. "The spirit in Koto-ku was on the playgrounds of an elementary school. The body hadn't been found until the other morning."

"How far did it spread?" Subaru asked, alarmed.

"The whole yard and into four classrooms on ground floor." Omi drew a deep breath. "Sixty-eight children age six to ten. I did my best to purify them and specifically warded the school." He shook his head. "Exposing children that young—"

"The location was important," the Sakurazukamori explained, resting his hand possessively on Subaru-san's shoulder. "There was no leeway for it."

"A sensible person would have warded the school," Subaru told him angrily.

"A sensible person wouldn't have had a beige-and-rust colored office," Sakurazuka returned.

Subaru stared at him, exasperated, then shook his head in resignation and gave Omi a sad smile. After skimming over the file, he said, "I couldn't possibly do more than you already did. I'm sure it'll be alright. And the last case?"

"The spirit was at the water edge." Omi placed the last file, opened, across those already on the table. "On the grounds of the Tokyu Shipping container yard down in Minato-ku. Its presence called a minor sea demon to shore."

"Returned to sea now, I suppose," the Sakurazukamori said with a hard edge in his voice.

"Yes, sir," Omi confirmed hastily. "And the spiritual essence was scattered as far as I managed. However, even minor, it was a demon landfall. We might see another visit from Susanoo's minions there."

"I'll make sure that we won't. Shibaura wharf is too close to the city center for demon plays." The Sakurazukamori left the table. Omi noticed, astonished, that he made a large step over the cat playing with the hem of his pants. "Subaru-kun, why don't you set the table for us and your guest while I make that call? The salmon should be done by the time I got the Mori earning their keep for a change."

Omi blinked, horrified. He was to eat *here*?!  
  
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"Omi seems to have a very sensitive palate," Seishiro commented when Subaru returned from showing Omi off. "He looked positively sick at my Ishikari-nabe<sup>58</sup>."

Subaru collected the dishes from the table. "I doubt his unease was about the food." He glanced at Seishiro as he handed him the stack. "As you well know."

"True." Seishiro stacked the used bowls into the dish washer. "I should have sent the cat off the premises."

"The cat—?" Subaru burst out laughing.

Seishiro closed the dish washer and switched it on. "So, did you give him a note about Okinawa for your grandmother?"

"No. I'm going to call her later." Subaru leaned against the kitchen counter. "What about the container yard?"

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58 Ishikari-nabe is a typical dish of Hokkaido, making use of fresh salmon from head to tail. Chunks of salmon are stewed with vegetables, tofu and konnyaku (devil's tongue) in kelp stock with potatoes and cabbage. Its origin is a salmon and vegetable stew cooked by the Ainu people in the 17-18th centuries. Seishiro's recipe is a private version with salmon fillet and fresh kelp instead of soup stock. [source: [http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/attractions/dining/food/jfood\\_02.html](http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/attractions/dining/food/jfood_02.html)]

"The first team should be on location by now." Seishiro appeared somber. "There'll be three shifts a day for the next two weeks. We're also installing cameras for a year or two."

"Cameras?" Subaru frowned.

"A demon may affect observers on location, but electronics are another matter. Either, they are overlooked and give us an image of the intruder, or they stop working altogether, which also raises an alarm." There was a hard line around Seishiro's mouth when he added, "You can trust me with this. I don't want an unchecked demon landfall any more than you do. Too messy."

"We shouldn't both leave town when a demon landfall is possible," Subaru said quietly.

"There's always this or that possible within the next fifteen minutes. If that stops us from leaving, we'll never get anywhere, not even the bath!" Seishiro wiped his hands. "Besides, we'll be no more than a phone call and a less than two hours flight away."

"Two hours that are entirely dependent on ANA's flight schedule," Subaru warned.

"A demon landfall is business." Seishiro shrugged. "I'll have the Learjet on standby in Naha."

"A Learjet?" Subaru stopped. "And why don't we—"

"—because that would mean business and not vacation!" The used towel made an audible snap as Seishiro slapped it onto the edge of the sink. "Excuse me. I have to make a couple of calls to arrange that now." The door bell chimed as he left the kitchen.

"I'll get that," Subaru called after him. Seishiro didn't bother to reply.

Kamui in a crisp school uniform was a welcome surprise. "We didn't have much time to talk at the memorial," he said sheepishly when Subaru unlocked the gate and pushed it wide to let him in. Kamui looked past him at the open house door. "Is *he* here?"

The gate clanged faintly. "Yes. We can talk in the garden if you prefer that."

Kamui nodded. "Yes. I think I do."

Sunlight filled the yard where the twisted crown of the old ginkgo didn't shade it from the afternoon sun. A breeze ruffled the tree and the ferns beneath it. Subaru ran his fingertips through their fronds in passing.

Kamui slowed and asked, "Those weren't here last time, were they?"

"No, I planted them later." Subaru brushed again over the ferns, finding their touch calming against his fingers. His cut palm didn't sting any more. A tiny yellow beetle buzzed away. The ginkgo above their heads rustled. For a moment, there were only the sounds of insects, leaves in the wind and the constant hum of the singing dead. Their melody had barely changed, he realized. There was nothing of the grating dissonance that had marked Kamui's last stay here. As if— No, Subaru decided. It was better not to consider the fading of Kamui's powers. He could hear Seishiro speaking on the phone and led Kamui closer to the ginkgo, away from the open bedroom window.

"Are you alright?" he asked, taking a seat on a gnarled root of the ancient tree. "Is something going on with the—" He didn't say Twin Star. It wasn't the right term any more.

"No, all's fine." Kamui gave him a wry smile. "He knows that I'm here though."

Subaru nodded, having expected as much. "How's it going?" he asked quietly and remembered the ghost of a long dead Sakurazukamori sitting exactly where he sat now.

"From day to day, sometimes from hour to hour." Kamui shrugged. "Somehow, it's as if— as if I'm getting to know him all over again."

"Probably you are," Subaru told him. "And probably, so is he." And probably Yue was around to tattle everything they said here to the Sakura.

"Yeah." Kamui flopped down on the overgrown desk chair beside the trunk, crushing some of last year's dried weeds that poked through the seat. "And sometimes it's dead-out like last year!"

"Does he threaten you?" Subaru asked, alarmed. "Hurt you?"

"Nope." Kamui actually grinned. "I told you I'm fine. It's just... he's not just Fuma, if that makes any sense."

"It does," Subaru nodded, relaxing again. "A lot, actually."

"And you?" Kamui inquired. The old wood of the chair creaked under his weight as he leaned forward. "What about you?"

"Life has become... *interesting*, for lack of a better word." Subaru looked at the open bedroom window, though Seishiro seemed to be done on the phone, and smiled self-ironically. "We're going to Okinawa the day after tomorrow."

"*Okinawa*?" Kamui's eyes widened. "You go on vacation with—" he turned and stared at the open window, shaking his head as if he wanted to 'unsee' something.

"It's nothing like that." Subaru actually felt his cheeks growing warm at the implication. "We're restructuring Japan's spiritual protection to accommodate the Dao and Okinawa requires special attention."

"And it's pure coincidence that you're going in Golden Week, right?" Kamui returned dryly. "*Sure*."

Subaru thought of Seishiro waving the flight ticket and smiled. "It's coincidence on my side," he affirmed, and admitted, "but probably not on Seishiro's."

Kamui stared at him. "You want this," he said as if testing the thought. "You truly want this," he repeated more firmly with a gesture that seemed to cover the world. "And not because of the Dao."

Subaru smiled wistfully. "Yes," he confirmed. "But the Dao makes it a lot easier to explain."

"I bet." Kamui snorted.

"Don't!" Subaru warned him, only half-joking. "Bets are dangerous things around here. Look where it got me."

Kamui looked at him thoughtfully. "You know this is twisted, don't you?" he asked, but there was acceptance in his expression. Maturity.

Subaru nodded.

Silence expanded between them. The old wood of the chair creaked under Kamui's weight when he glanced at his watch. "I have to get going. Imonoyama-san arranged for cram sessions." He sighed. "I still have to repeat the year, but maybe I'll end up with grades to make up for it."

"I'm sure of it," Subaru encouraged him. "I know I wasn't much of a tutor."

"Hey! You kept me going at all!" Kamui protested, fumbling a letter from the pocket of his school blazer as he stood. He gave it to Subaru. "It's from Imonoyama-san. He said it would be your answer."

Subaru opened the slightly wrinkled envelope in the shadow of the ginkgo after Kamui had left. It held a sheet of off-white, delicately patterned paper with a single line of Imonoyama's flowing handwriting on it:

*~To love someone means that one's willing to grow old beside that person.~<sup>59</sup>*

~

The End

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<sup>59</sup> "To love someone..." is a quote from Caligula in "Caligula & Three Other Plays" by Albert Camus, Vintage Books, New York, 1958, p71 as translated by Stuart Gilbert. The original text is "Aimer un être, c'est accepter de vieillir avec lui." by Caligula in Caligula, act 4, sc. 13, Pléiade (1944). It is the answer to Subaru's question of "How do you define love, when..." at the end of chapter 12.



"No," Seishiro explained briskly. "What we're setting up is a position which is a little more visible. We're close enough to the dark to vanish if necessary, but far enough into the light not to be replaceable on a whim. In addition, we streamline the current system and shorten our response time. It's a win-win setup, actually."

=They might not see that,= Michiko's warning came instantly. =You have Korea and Hokkaido—=

"—and Honshu and Shikoku," Seishiro interrupted her.

=But Kyushu has a problem with it.=

"No, Michiko," Seishiro said incredibly soft. "Kyushu won't have any problems at all." He disconnected the line.

Stay tuned for  
**"Business As Usual"**  
Coming soon.