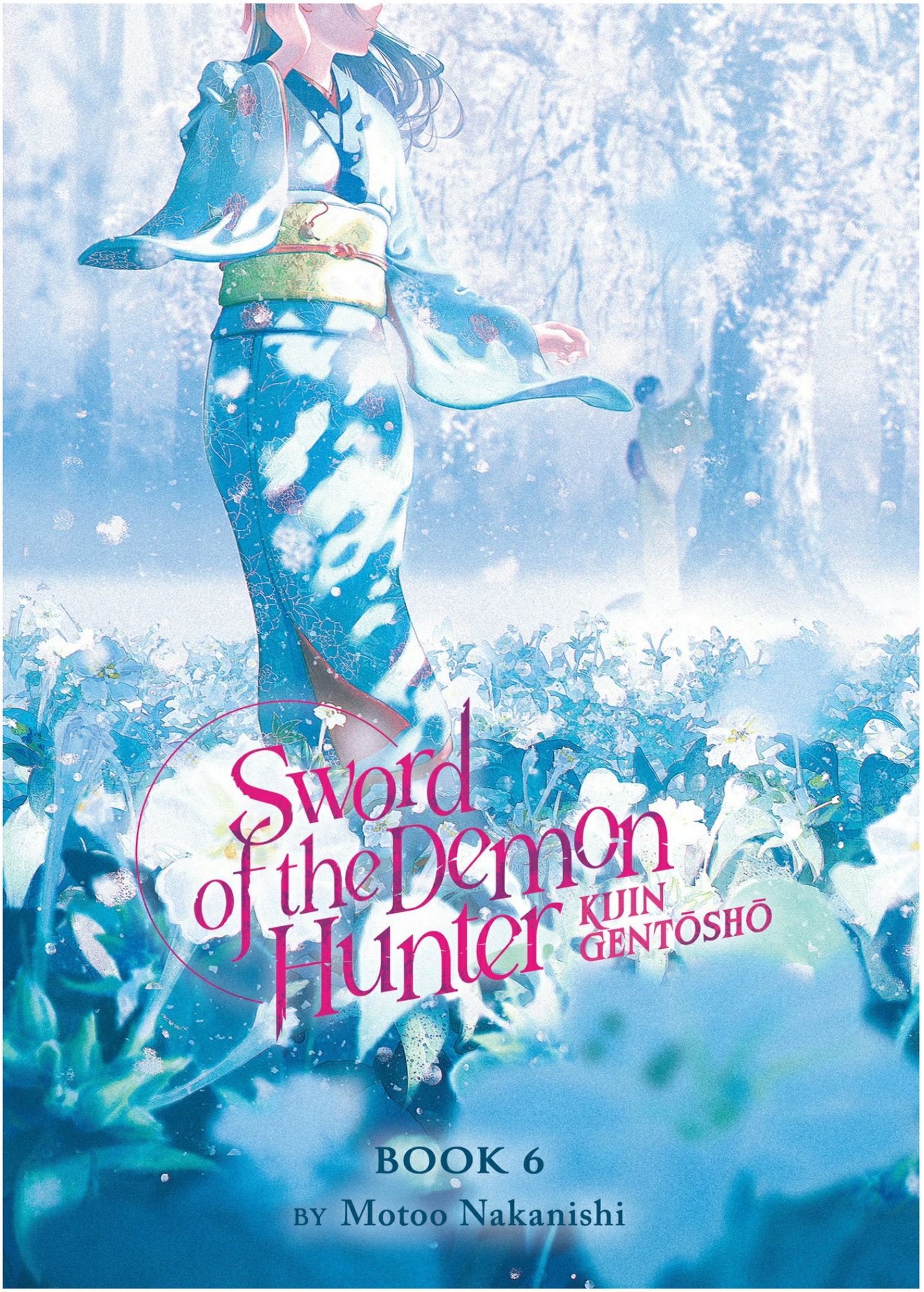
Sword of the Demon Hunter
KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ
BOOK 6
BY Motoo Nakanishi

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Sword of the Demon Hunter

KIJIN GENTŌSHŌ

BOOK 6

WRITTEN BY

Motoo Nakanishi

Seven Seas Entertainment

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MEIJI ARC:
SUMMER NIGHT MIRAGE

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Character List

Jinya: A ronin who makes his living by hunting demons, despite being a demon himself. Currently gathering strength to face the Demon God in Kadono in 170 years' time.

Nomari: Jinya's beloved daughter, entrusted to him by the demon Yuunagi.

Kaneomi: A woman who began living with Jinya and Nomari after coming to him with demon-hunting work. Goes nowhere without her sword, the demonic blade Yatonomori Kaneomi.

Akitsu Somegorou the Third: The third to inherit the name of master metalworker Akitsu Somegorou. An artifact spirit user.

Utsugi Heikichi: Somegorou's disciple. Loathes demons.

Himawari: A demon who is a daughter of Magatsume.

Jishibari: Daughter of Magatsume and younger sister of Himawari. Has the power to manipulate chains.

Suzune: Jinya's sister by birth. A demon, and the one who killed Shirayuki, the woman Jinya loved. Her whereabouts have remained unknown since the tragedy of Kadono.

Meiji Arc

Late Night Tales of Demonic Swords

Mikage: The Spirit

1

IT WAS NOW AUGUST in year ten of the Meiji era (1877 AD).

Jinya had felt the recent passage of time keenly. He may have been a demon with a thousand-year life span, but one year was a long time by human standards. Long enough for many things to change.

“Oh, hey. Mornin’, Kadono-san.”

“Good morning.”

Jinya was cleaning the front of his restaurant when he ran into Mihashi Toyoshige, the owner of Mihashiya, who was doing the same thing. The two got ready to open their respective businesses around the same time each morning, so they often ran into each other like this. Being neighbors, they were on fairly friendly terms.

“’Nother scorcher today, eh?”

“Looks like it.”

Toyoshige carried himself more confidently than before now that he’d turned twenty-five years old. He still grumbled as he cleaned, but he always tidied up diligently.

“Take care.”

“You too.”

After bidding one another a brief goodbye, the two returned to their businesses and began to prepare for the day. Around this time, Nomari usually woke up and went to the well behind the shop to wash her face. She used to pretend to be asleep so she could have him wake her up, but now she got up on her own. The change made Jinya a bit sad, but that was just a part of growing

up.

“Breakfast is ready,” he called out.

“’Kay.”

The two sat across from one another at the table, eating quietly.

Children grew up fast. Nomari still tied her black hair up with a pink ribbon like she used to, but her face was gradually losing its youthfulness, and her body was filling out. She could be called a young lady now.

“What?” She squirmed uncomfortably when she noticed him staring at her.

“…Nothing.”

“Okay?”

After such a confusing exchange, the two resumed eating in silence, with only the clatter of eating utensils filling the void. Looking for some way to dispel the awkward air, Jinya said, “The weather’s nice today.”

“I guess.”

The two were not fighting by any means. Nomari didn’t seem troubled by her home life nor with work, and she was just as thoughtful as she’d been in the past. But the two of them could not converse as they once did.

She had grown, which naturally meant she had become thorny toward her father. It had been a long time since he’d seen her old blithe smile.

“Say, Nomari, do you want to go out and do something together sometime?” he suggested.

She made a face and looked away. “No, I’ll pass. I’ve got housework and stuff to take care of.”

“But it would do you good to get out of the hou—”

“I said I’ll pass!” She cut him off strongly, but then, a bit surprised that she had raised her voice, she blushed. “S-sorry. I’ll go get the restaurant ready.”

She trotted out of the room, not meeting his eyes once. He watched her go, too bewildered to say a word.

Kadono Nomari was now fourteen years old—a difficult age, no matter the era.

After night fell and Nomari went to bed, Jinya started drinking in the restaurant. He'd been drinking more than usual as of late.

"I would say you're at some fault there too."

He may have been a strong drinker, but alcohol still loosened his lips, causing him to tell Kaneomi about his troubles from that morning.

With a wry grin, she firmly said, "It was wrong of Nomari-san to run out like that in the middle of a conversation, but as her father, you have a duty to scold her at such times."

A father held authority in a household. But as someone who'd lived most of his childhood without parents, Jinya wasn't confident he knew how to properly act like one and had never strongly scolded Nomari before.

"You think so…?"

"I do. At times, you must scold her for her own sake. She's not a child anymore. She's fourteen, old enough that it wouldn't be a surprise for her to marry."

"…Marry?" He felt it was much too soon for that. When she was still small, he had claimed that she would eventually choose her own spouse. He had meant it then, but the thought of her marrying worried him now that she was actually of age to do so.

Seeing him so worked up at the idea, Kaneomi let out an exasperated sigh. "Like I said, she's not a child anymore."

"I know… At least, I thought I did…" Jinya knew nothing stayed the same forever. Nomari would obviously become an adult one day, but he hadn't

understood what that meant in the truest sense. He still spoke to her like she was a child, even when his mind told him he shouldn't. She had grown, but *he* hadn't grown with her. "I'm pathetic," he muttered.

Though Kaneomi didn't drink, she did pour for him. He didn't want to trouble her at first, but she insisted, saying this was her small way of thanking him for various things.

He downed a full cup, the liquor burning his throat as it glided down. Drinking roughly like this wasn't bad from time to time, but Nomari still weighed on his mind.

"Were you ever the way Nomari is now?" he asked, thinking there might be some things only a fellow woman could understand.

Kaneomi made a troubled face and replied, "No, my birth parents passed away a long time ago, so I never had the luxury of disobeying them. That said, I can't see myself being rebellious even if they were alive."

That was news to him. The two of them hadn't had many real chances to talk. He knew next to nothing about her past, even though he'd lived with her for almost five years.

"Sorry for asking. The alcohol is making me rude," he said.

"Not at all. I don't mind."

She poured him a new cup. He drank it down in one go, as if he was trying to swallow his gloom along with it. She laughed softly, sensing his intentions.

"Being a parent is tough," he remarked.

"Of course it is. You're raising a whole person."

"Come to think of it, you had a master, didn't you?"

Parents and masters weren't much different in that they both had the responsibility to look after someone. He had asked his question without much thought, but it made her freeze up momentarily.

“Did Akitsu-sama tell you?”

“Yeah. Sorry, you don’t need to answer. I didn’t mean to be rude again,” he quickly apologized. The alcohol must have been affecting him more than he thought. Somegorou had told him Kaneomi’s master was done in by a demon, so obviously the topic was a touchy one for her.

She thought for a moment, then smiled softly. “It’s fine. I know you didn’t mean any harm. Sadly, I doubt what I could say on the matter would be very interesting anyway.” She sounded like she was making a joke of it, but she couldn’t possibly be that calm on the inside. Her master had likely been killed by Jishibari, and that was why she sought her with vengeance in mind.

Jinya inadvertently let out a sigh. Like him, she unbecomingly clung to the blade and sought revenge. There was no place for either of them in the Meiji era.

“Do you have no intention of taking a wife, Kadono-sama?” Her question was a clear move to change the subject; by taking the initiative, she allowed him to save face. He saw no point in delving deeper into her past. Her lingering regrets would only be cleared away when Jishibari was slain.

“I have no women I see that way in my life. Besides, Nomari has told me herself that she doesn’t want a mother.”

“I see. It’s quite like you to respect her wishes.” She smiled softly, enjoying herself.

“What about you?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, I have no men like that in my life. Moreover, I am a blade. I doubt anyone is peculiar enough to wed me.”

She poured him a cup, making him smile slightly. The last drop came out with a *plop*, leaving the final decanter bottle empty.

“Late-night drinking is bad for one’s health. Perhaps it’s time to call it a day,” she suggested.

“You’re right. Thanks for listening to my grumblings.” He downed the remaining liquor in his cup, then softly sighed as a comforting warmth spread through him. He was full of worries with no idea how to resolve them, but he felt like a load had been taken off his shoulders.

“It was my pleasure. I’m more than happy to lend you an ear after you’ve been so good to me all these years.” She smiled back at him, relieved to see him feeling better. She put the decanter bottles away and retired for the night.

Even when they drank together, the two didn’t share much about their backgrounds. Despite living under the same roof, they kept one another at arm’s length. He watched her go with a strange feeling of peace, then stood up to get ready for bed.

Then he heard a voice from the darkness. “Father?”

“Nomari? What are you doing up this late?”

Through a narrowly opened paper sliding door, she peered at him with a terribly ill-humored look on her face.

“Nothing, I just got up for a bit. Were you drinking?” Her tone was cold. He wasn’t doing anything bad, but he felt guilty, nonetheless.

“Um, yeah.”

“With Kaneomi-san? Alone? At night?”

“…Yeah.”

Her expression was emotionless, her voice flat. She clearly was not asking her questions out of interest or curiosity.

Jinya rarely ever felt overwhelmed by his demon adversaries, but the pressure now emanating from his daughter made him wince.

She furrowed her brow slightly, disapproval in her eyes. Quietly, she muttered, “…Gross.”

She left without waiting for a response.

The suddenness of it all left Jinya speechless. He didn't even know what he should say, if he could even reply. He stood there for a while in a daze, processing what had happened.

"Our little Nomari-chan's turned out rather cute, hasn't she?" Somegorou, who was visiting for lunch, watched Nomari make her way around the restaurant.

Though he wouldn't say so out loud himself, Jinya agreed with the man. Nomari had grown into an attractive young lady, and he was sure that wasn't just his fatherly bias speaking.

"Shoot, guess that means I really am an old geezer now, huh?" Somegorou said emotionally. Like Jinya, he had watched Nomari grow up. He slurped his noodles with a soft, peaceful expression on his face—a face not unlike the kind a grandparent might make after seeing their grandchildren in good health.

Jinya knew it wasn't like the man to be so emotional, though. There had to be more to it.

"You think Nomari's turned out nicely too, don't ya, Heikichi?"

Just as Jinya predicted, Somegorou began teasing his disciple who was sitting next to him with a peaceful look on his face.

"H-huh?!"

"What, am I wrong? Ya don't think she's cute?"

Utsugi Heikichi, disciple of Akitsu Somegorou, had turned seventeen that year. In preparation for becoming an artifact spirit user, he'd trained his body well. His shoulders were broader than those of most men his age, and his height was a tall five-and-a-half shaku.[1] He had learned a number of techniques already and was capable enough for Somegorou to proudly claim he was "up to snuff."

"Huh? No, I do. Wait, what?"

Heikichi loathed demons, but he still visited Demon Soba without a word of complaint. At first, he only came because his master forced him along, but he'd since begun coming alone on his own time, and Jinya was savvy enough to guess why that was.

"I mean, I guess she's gotten rather pretty… Wait, what are you making me say?!"

"There's no point trying to hide anythin', Heikichi," Somegorou whispered just loud enough for Jinya to still hear. "I know you come here on your own every now and then just to see Nomari-chan."

"Wh-wha—*How do you know that?!"* Heikichi exclaimed as he blushed bright red, as though he genuinely believed he had been discreet at all.

"But wow, she really grew to be somethin', huh? That pink ribbon looks real good on her too. Maybe you should start gettin' on her father's good side while you still can, Heikichi. If you're not careful, someone else might make off with her first."

"M-Master, it's not like that, really!"

"There's no need to try and hide anythin' from me. Go on now, Nomari's father is right here."

Jinya knew Heikichi had been infatuated with Nomari ever since they were young, but the young man hadn't made much progress with her at all; he was only able to talk to her on the level of an acquaintance. He could work up the courage to come alone to Demon Soba, but he always left dejected, having failed to confess his feelings for her every time.

"Could you not talk about things like this right in front of me? It kind of puts me in an awkward spot," Jinya said. Teasing Heikichi was really just a way for Somegorou to needle Jinya.

"Oh? You don't seem *that* bothered by the idea, though?" Somegorou said.

"I can trust Heikichi more than I can trust some stranger from who-knows-

where. He's your disciple, after all."

"Oh, jeez. Hearing that kinda makes me embarrassed." Somegorou bashfully scratched his cheek. His good intuition told him that Jinya meant what he said. "Putting that aside, you really wouldn't mind if Heikichi and Nomari-chan got married?"

"I wouldn't. That's her decision to make."

Since the Meiji era began, the idea of people marrying out of love had become slightly more common. Truthfully, Jinya wanted Nomari to remain by his side as his daughter a little longer, but he was willing to put her wishes before his own.

Something did nag at him, though. He had no problem with Heikichi, but at one time, there had been another who might've married Nomari. *Had been*. There was no way Jinya could marry his daughter to his good friend's family anymore, not after he had killed that friend. How could he dare show his face before the man's wife and son ever again?

"Wait, really?! You wouldn't mind?!" Heikichi exclaimed excitedly. He was a hardworking man who was sincere and morally sound. Jinya believed Nomari would be in good hands with him. But it wasn't up to him.

"Like I said, it all comes down to—" Before Jinya could finish his words, a sad but angry voice cut him off.

"…Could you not talk about these things behind my back?" Nomari, having seemingly appeared out of thin air, stared expressionlessly at the group. A silence followed until eventually she left to welcome a new customer who'd entered the restaurant.

"Did I just screw myself over?" Heikichi groaned.

"I wouldn't worry about it. She's been in a mood lately," Jinya said. The only one with something to worry about was him. It was wrong to talk about her future when she wasn't there. He should have been more mindful as her father.

“Being a father sounds like a rough time,” Somegorou joked.

“You have no idea,” Jinya groaned. He must’ve seemed especially exhausted, as Somegorou changed the subject and forced a bright smile.

“I’ve got one of those rumors that’re right up your alley. Let me share it with you to show I’m sorry for what just happened.”

“Oh?” Jinya’s expression changed instantly. No matter how much he adjusted to a normal life, he remained a demon. He could not stray from the path he followed. He loathed his changeless self but listened to Somegorou regardless.

“Folks are saying a demon night parade was spotted. I haven’t heard about it claiming any victims yet, but the demons are clearly up to something.”

The term “night parade” originated from a story called “Night Parade of a Hundred Demons,” featured in *A Collection of Tales from Uji*, in which a monk witnessed the appearance of a hundred demons at Ryusenji Temple in Settsu. In common usage, however, the term referred to a massive procession of demons and spirits that stalked the town on a nightly basis. There were many tales that said encountering a night parade was an inauspicious event that shortened your life span. Night parades were also a representative example of spirits acting freely in towns without care for mankind.

“Interesting. That certainly is up my alley,” Jinya said. If the rumors specifically involved a night parade, then there had to be more than just a few demons sighted.

It was hard to imagine the night parade had formed on its own. There was likely someone pulling strings, and Jinya had a good idea who that someone might be.

“Oh, I should mention,” Somegorou said like he had just remembered. “Apparently there’s a demon that controls chains at the heart of the night parade.”

Magatsume was making her move.

2

TO PUT IT SIMPLY, Kaneomi was a sword.

“My daughter will lead the Nagumo one day, but she currently lacks the talent for the blade. Please give her your guidance.”

The Nagumo were a renowned line of spirit hunters. The daughter of the family’s current head was Nagumo Kazusa, a gentle girl whose dainty arms were ill-suited for holding a blade.

“I will be in your care.”

She was only a twelve-year-old child when her father introduced her to Kaneomi. Despite her meek appearance, her hands bore thick calluses from diligent training; however, her skill with the sword remained crude. And, worse yet, she could not bring herself to kill demons, always stopping her blade moments before contact. All the talent and training in the world would mean nothing if they were restrained by a soft heart.

In Kaneomi’s honest opinion, the girl was not meant to fight. She was far too kind. To her, hurting others was akin to hurting herself. She was not fit to lead a family of demon hunters.

You are not meant to wield a blade.

Such blunt words were the greatest kindness Kaneomi could give. Despite what Kazusa’s father may have thought, she did not necessarily have to be the family’s leader. There must have been better options than such a gentle girl.

“I agree. But I believe that is precisely why my father wishes for me to lead the Nagumo one day.”

The girl smiled softly, unoffended by Kaneomi’s insolent words. She was more resilient than she looked.

“I understand you think I am unfit to wield a demonic blade because I hesitate to kill demons…but I believe those who do not hesitate are the truly unfit ones. A

demonic blade may have a will of its own, but it cannot choose what it cuts. Hence, its wielder must be someone who can choose."

Kaneomi had only seen a weak little girl, but she was more than that. This girl was determined.

Without a hint of doubt in her voice, Nagumo Kazusa said, *"We, the Nagumo, pride ourselves on knowing when to kill and when not to kill."*

One had to wonder whether there had ever been a family of spirit hunters as soft as the Nagumo. Kaneomi felt exasperated, but she was fond nonetheless of the family that went so far as to consider how a demonic sword, of all things, might feel. She found herself won over by the girl who now smiled before her.

It was Kaneomi's wish that Kazusa remain the kind girl she was. To that end, she was prepared to aid her by cutting down those who stood in her way and carving a path forward. She wanted to serve as her blade. But now the sight of a chain piercing Kazusa's body lingered vividly in her mind.

Something precious had been taken from Kaneomi, and she was prepared to bear whatever humiliation necessary to regain it. She lived for no other purpose. The only way of life afforded to her was that of the blade. Her scabbard had been lost long ago.

"You there, halt!"

Kaneomi trotted down Sanjyou Street in a half jog. Being chased by the police was a common occurrence for her since she continued to wear a sword even after the Sword Abolishment Edict was passed. In fact, it was so common an occurrence that she was regarded as a person of interest by the local authorities. Still, not once did she entertain the idea of leaving her sword behind at Demon Soba.

"Phew…" She was beginning to tire of all the chasing. She was not suited to the Meiji era.

With the police now off her tracks, she slowed down to a walk. Shortly afterward, she happened across Heikichi groaning in front of a sundries store.

“Utsugi-sama?”

“Oh, Kaneomi-san.” He seemed to be deeply mulling over something, but he gave a small bow when he noticed her. Not one to be rude, she bowed back slightly as well. He asked, “What brings you here?”

“Nothing in particular. What about you?”

It was a bit odd to see a well-built seventeen-year-old youth racking his brain over feminine combs and accessories. Heikichi blushed slightly at the question.

“Oh, uh, nothing. Yeah.”

“I see.” She didn’t care enough to ask further, so the topic ended there.

To Kaneomi, Heikichi was nothing more than a frequent customer at the soba restaurant where she freeloaded. To Heikichi, Kaneomi was nothing more than an acquaintance of his master, as well as a freeloader at the soba restaurant where he ate. The two recognized one another, but they were by no means close. Hence, an awkward silence formed between them as the topic came to an end. Wanting to escape the oppressive silence, Kaneomi began a new, harmless conversation.

“Where’s Akitsu-sama today?”

“He went off to eat soba. Well, more like to see that *demon*, I guess.” Though he’d known Jinya for a while now, Heikichi still hadn’t quite accepted him.

“The usual, then.”

“Pretty much. He seems to have some strange rumors to share this time, though.”

“You don’t say? Could you tell me more?”

“Sure. Apparently, a demon that controls chains has been stalking the night with other demons in tow.”

Heikichi had no way of knowing just how significant those words were to Kaneomi.

***

Once night came and Nomari was asleep, Jinya took Yarai and affixed it to his side. The Sword Abolishment Edict made it risky to carry swords, but it would be foolhardy not to take one along now. He followed the law on the surface alone, unable to bring himself to part with the blade.

He took a slow, deep breath to calm himself, then headed for the restaurant's entrance to leave. He found Kaneomi waiting there for him.

"Kadono-sama."

It was nothing unusual for him to go out in the early hours like this, but her expression was dark. It was not hard to guess why.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Jishibari has appeared."

As he expected, she too had heard the rumors of the night parade. No wonder she looked so disturbed. It had been five years since her sworn enemy was last seen. Still, the fact that her fury didn't drive her to do something reckless showed she still recognized the reality of her situation. Kaneomi was too weak to defeat Jishibari alone, and she knew that better than anyone.

"Looks like it," he said. "Apparently, she's leading a parade of demons now. She's moved up in the world since we last saw her."

"Are you going after her?"

"I am. Somegorou told me where to start looking. What will you do?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

"No, I suppose not."

It was a pointless question. Of course she would go. Finding Jishibari was the only reason she had stuck to the sword all this time; she'd be a fool to hesitate

now. With tragic but firm resolve, she lowered her head to Jinya.

“…Please, lend me your aid.”

She begged for his help. For those who lived by the sword, admitting one’s own ineptitude like this was humiliating. But Jinya knew that not being able to slay a loathed enemy was a far more bitter thing.

“You’re incredible,” he said truthfully. “I thought you would act on your own the moment you heard Jishibari had reappeared, but I was wrong. You didn’t surrender to your hate.”

“It is not something I deserve praise for. I simply know I am too weak to do anything.” She gritted her teeth in frustration, her shapely face warping. Her fated enemy had come, and all she could do was beg for the help of another. That mortified her to no end.

“It’s harder to admit one’s weakness than it is to be strong. I’m sure your nature doesn’t let you be proud of it, but you really needn’t be ashamed. Your ability to force back your hatred is incredible.” Jinya found Kaneomi’s self-restraint to be awe-inspiring. His left hand automatically reached for Yarai, and a slight smile formed on his face. “It’s enviable, even. That kind of thing is beyond me.”

If he had Kaneomi’s strength, then maybe he could have found a different path that didn’t involve him hurting his sister that night long ago. But even as a part of him came to that realization, hatred stirred within him like thick sludge. Even now, he lacked that strength. Perhaps the path he trod was all he was ever meant for.

“Sorry. I seem to do nothing but grumble to you these days,” he said.

“Heh. That is fine. It just means I am trusted, does it not?” Kaneomi finally smiled a bit, albeit faintly. That alone made his foolishness worthwhile. With the tension now gone from her shoulders, she met his eyes directly. “Kadono-sama, would you be willing to listen to my story?”

The look in her eyes told him she was sincere. This would be the first time they would truly be learning about one another. There were many things Jinya couldn't ask her out of hesitation to dredge up the painful past, and she had avoided questioning him about many things as well. That was why they had kept their distance all these years despite living together. But now she was making the first move to share, and it would be wrong of him to stop her when she was being so bold.

"Of course."

"Thank you." After a small bow, she smiled slightly. Softly, she began. "My story is a pathetic one. A story of a sword that failed to protect its master…"

***

Kaneomi served Nagumo Kazusa as her sword, but she meant more than just that to Kazusa. For her, Kaneomi was a swordmaster, an older sister who could admonish her from time to time, and an irreplaceable friend. Kaneomi enjoyed her time with the Nagumo.

"Heya, Kazusa. How've ya been?"

Occasionally a man by the name of Akitsu Somegorou would visit the Nagumo home. The Nagumo used a demonic sword, and the Akitsu used artifact spirits. In other words, both worked with items that had formed wills. Perhaps because of that, Akitsu shared a friendship with the Nagumo. The third Somegorou would occasionally arrive bearing Kyoto snacks as gifts, sometimes spending the entire day at the Nagumo house.

"Thank you for visiting, Uncle Akitsu."

"Ha ha, 'Uncle'? C'mon now, I'm not that *old!"*

"You're in your thirties. You're well past being an old man," Kaneomi grumbled. Kazusa overheard, laughed, and repeated it for Somegorou to hear.

With a bright smile on his face, he glared at Kaneomi and menacingly said, *"Oho, now, is that right?"*

He was an immature, childish man, but Kazusa seemed to laugh a lot when he was there, so Kaneomi looked the other way.

Somegorou had no wife or children of his own, but he doted on Kazusa a lot. He even tagged along with her out of worry when she turned fifteen and went demon hunting for the first time.

Kaneomi still remembered that particular night. Though Kazusa had killed demons before in training, she lacked true combat experience. Somegorou offered to help, but as the future head of the Nagumo family, she was dead set on finishing things herself.

Her hands trembled before the demon, more out of hesitation to kill than fear.

It'll be fine. You can do it, Kaneomi said soothingly.

A bit stiffly, Kazusa smiled. *"You'll help me, right?"*

But of course. I am your blade.

In the end, Kaneomi didn't need to do anything. Kazusa slew the demon with ease. Her training had borne fruit.

As the demon vanished into nothingness, a single tear rolled down Kazusa's cheek. *"I won't ask for your forgiveness. This is our duty."*

She gritted her teeth, lamenting the fact that she'd shed a tear at all. She had chosen to kill, so she had no right to cry. To do so was an attempt to escape the harshness of her decision.

Kaneomi knew then and there that she served the right master. Kazusa had grown strong but remained kind. She was worthy of respect.

But ends always come abruptly.

Two years passed. Kazusa had grown accustomed to fighting demons. Somegorou no longer tagged along with her, having witnessed her growth.

Like she might do any other day, she received a job and went off to slay a

demon. The demon she encountered was an unusual one, however. It was featureless: no face, no hair, no skin. It had only two legs, two arms, and nails. It was a demon lacking in every sense. But its appearance didn't matter; the task that needed to be done was the same.

As always, Kazusa fought with hesitant strikes. However, this demon was unlike any other she had faced before. With its ability to manipulate chains, it killed her with ease.

Without even a moment to say goodbye, Kazusa's soul left her body. Eyes then began to form on the demon's face, then a nose, then a mouth. With its freshly formed mouth, the demon murmured its own name as though to confirm it had one. *"Jishibari… I…am Jishibari…"*

Kaneomi cursed herself as she listened to the voice from afar. Fleeing with the hollow husk that had been Kazusa was all she could manage. She'd failed to protect her master and could not even avenge her. Kaneomi was a worthless blade that could not fulfill its purpose.

And the rest was as Jinya knew it.

Kaneomi went to Somegorou and was introduced to a swordsman who could reportedly slay demons with a single strike. She commissioned him to capture Jishibari.

She had only one goal in mind: to take back what the demon stole from her. Having lost everything, that goal was the only thing that sustained her.

***

"…And that is why…I must…"

"That's enough."

Despite her efforts to speak flatly, her voice trembled, and her expression warped with grief. So much regret filled her eyes that they nearly overflowed, and Jinya curtly told her to stop. The rough gist of her story was enough. Any more and she'd just be torturing herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I won’t pretend I understand how you feel, but I know what it’s like to fail to protect something.”

Youthful days spent together with a loved one flitted through his mind. She had been dear to him, yet he had failed to protect her. He could not know Kaneomi’s pain, just as she could not know his, but they could still sympathize with one another.

“Heya. Hope I didn’t keep ya waiting long, Jinya. You ready to go?”

The restaurant’s door suddenly slid open, making Kaneomi stiffen in surprise.

“Akitsu-sama…?”

“Evening. Mind if I tag along?”

The heavy air cleared slightly with Somegorou’s arrival. Kaneomi looked to Jinya for answers, wondering what Somegorou was doing there, but he didn’t have much of an explanation to give. He wasn’t thrilled by Somegorou’s participation either.

“Sorry. He forced himself along,” Jinya said. He’d intended to challenge the night parade alone, but Somegorou had offered his help because he knew Jinya had already failed to defeat Jishibari once. Jinya had refused him several times, but Somegorou paid him no mind and one-sidedly insisted that he would join in.

“Whatcha so reluctant for, anyway? You’re up against a *whole parade* of demons. The more helping hands you can get, the better, right?” Somegorou said.

“…Hmph.” He had a point. More help was always better, and Jinya also knew Somegorou’s skill as a demon hunter was nothing to scoff at. Still, he was hesitant to accept his aid.

“You know, it’s awfully polite of ya to wait for me even when you don’t want me comin’ along,” Somegorou said.

“You’d just follow me on your own if I left without you.”

“Heh, that I would. You know me well.”

They’d known each other long enough for Jinya to understand how persistent the man could be. Still, Jinya had to at least try to stop him. He looked Somegorou in the eyes and said, “I’ll ask you once more. Don’t come.”

Jinya knew he couldn’t stop Kaneomi from going. Ideally, he would handle this all by himself, but he understood this was her fight. He was just her hired help.

His first encounter with Jishibari had ended in defeat because he’d had to protect Kaneomi, and he understood something similar could happen again. But even then, he couldn’t stop her from going. Logic be damned, her pride was on the line. There was no way she would agree to stay behind.

Somegorou was different, though. He had no stake in this fight.

“What, are ya afraid I’ll croak or somethin’?”

Jinya kept silent. Somegorou had guessed right.

Somegorou was nearing fifty—an old man. His technique may have improved over the years, but his body was unmistakably in decline. Jinya had no idea how well he could fight at this point and didn’t want him to throw his life away, especially in a fight he had no stake in. Jinya refused Somegorou’s help solely out of worry for him.

“Aha ha ha, I appreciate your concern, but we humans are tougher than you’d think. I won’t kick the bucket that easily.” Somegorou was in a place where he could smile softly. When he was younger, his smiles had always been forced, but now they came from the heart. “Humans are not as strong as demons, nor do they live as long, and yet we are undying.”

Somegorou’s soft voice carried a strong will and a bold claim. Unfortunately, Jinya did not see things the same way. Humans were fragile. Their bodies caved in with ease, and their lives were transient. Nothing that exists is changeless. To a long-lived demon like Jinya, humans were as far from undying as could be.

“From the look on your face, I take it you don’t believe me. That’s fine, though. Let me prove man’s tenacity to you firsthand.” Somegorou shrugged, as if he hadn’t expected Jinya to believe him from the start. He spun around and briskly walked toward the exit. “Why don’t we get going already? I don’t need yer worry or nothin’. It’s not like I’m doing this just out of the goodness of my heart.” He narrowed his eyes and flashed a faint, pained smile—but only for a moment. He was back to his aloof self in the blink of an eye, and just like that, the topic ended with no real closure.

“Kadono-sama, is this really okay?” Kaneomi asked.

“He probably has something up his sleeve. We can’t stop him, anyway. If he wants to help, then that’s that.”

“…I see.”

Somegorou wasn’t the type of man to listen to others. The whole thing still bothered Jinya, but there was only so much he could do to push back. He urged Kaneomi to step out first so he could have a moment to gather himself. She nodded and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, whatever hesitation she had about Somegorou was gone.

After she went out, Jinya took a slow breath and focused his mind. He stepped forward when he was ready, but a delicate voice called out to him just then.

“Father?”

He turned to see Nomari looking at him worriedly. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“It’s fine… Are you going somewhere?” Her voice trembled slightly. She’d grown up so much, but her frail voice made him recall her younger self.

“I have some of *this* work to take care of.” With a flat expression, he patted Yarai’s hilt.

She looked down at her feet, a complicated mix of loneliness and sorrow on her face.

“Go ahead and sleep. I won’t be long.”

“…I get it. I can’t say anything to stop you, can I?”

Her words hurt him even more because he knew they were true. All his love for his daughter wouldn’t do a thing to ease the hatred smoldering inside him. Just what did she think of such a father?

Timidly, she looked up at him, revealing moist eyes. His heart clenched. He had his answer.

“Nomari…”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

He knew she didn’t mean it. She was such a gentle child that she could be hurt by her own words. Seeing her near tears like this hurt him more than any demon he fought had ever done. He extended his hand, wanting to console her.

“Ah…”

But his hand never reached her. She stepped back as soon as he tried to pat her head.

“I’m sorry.”

“…It’s fine.” He stiffened, not sure what to do but unable to bear looking at his daughter’s pained face.

A silence followed, but it was cleared away by a crude smile from Nomari. Her expression was stiff, as if she was fighting back tears. “Take care, Father.”

He wasn’t dense enough to miss that she was holding back emotion, but she was trying to see him off properly regardless. To such a loving daughter, he calmly replied, “Thanks. Be back soon.”

Neither said what they truly wished to say, and Jinya turned away and left.

Come to think of it, he remembered how someone else had waited at home for him to return like this, long, long ago. He could no longer remember his feelings from that time, though.

3

ONE NIGHT LONG AGO, a man stayed with a prostitute in Sajikiya of Ichijyou. The night was met with ghastly winds and rain, but a voice outside on the main thoroughfare could be heard chanting a sutra about the impermanence of all things. Curious, the man raised the latticed shutters slightly and saw a horse-headed demon whose height reached the eaves of the building.

The man closed the latticed shutters in terror and recoiled to the back of the room. The demon slid the latticed outer door aside and stuck its head in, saying, "Ye laid eyes on me. How dare ye lay eyes on me." The man drew a sword and brought the prostitute to his side, then told the demon to stay away or be cut down. The demon responded, "Look all ye please," and left.

The man fearfully wondered if perhaps demons were parading through the night that day.

—Excerpt from *A Collection of Tales from Uji*

Stories of demons parading through the night were by no means rare. The night parades of demons and spirits were not merely the subject of tales but were also the artistic theme of emaki picture scrolls. One noteworthy example was the Shinjuan-bon emaki picture scroll from the Muromachi period, which depicted a line of artifact spirits stalking the night.

However, the recent rumors of a night parade were entirely divorced from art. They spoke of a chain-manipulating being that led a procession of its fellow demons. If that chain-manipulating demon was Jishibari, then Magatsume had to be somewhere behind the scenes as well. That possibility made Jinya want to take the night parade on alone. If he hadn't had Kaneomi's request to consider, then he would have sought the night parade without telling a soul.

That said, his current companions would most likely have found a way to tag

along regardless, given who they were.

“Somegorou, are you sure this is the place?” Jinya asked.

“Mm-hmm. All the rumors mentioned the area near Ichijyou.”

The sightings of the night parade had all been centered around Ichijyou Street.

In *Tales of Times Now Past* from the late Heian period, a samurai crossing a bridge over Ichijyou Canal on the night of New Year’s Eve encountered a group of demons holding lanterns. In *A Collection of Tales from Uji*, a man staying in a building along Ichijyou Street’s main thoroughfare saw a massive demon with the head of a horse. In the Muromachi period’s *Annals of Artifact Spirits*, angered abandoned vessels became demons and stalked Ichijyou Street to seek revenge on mankind. Kyoto was known as the City of Spirits, but Ichijyou specifically was known as the home of the night parade.

The night was silent. Jinya looked around but didn’t see a soul, human or demon. An audible gust of wind blew through the air, kicking up dust. Ichijyou Street was quiet enough for even the faint whisper of wind to be heard.

More than half a koku[2] must have passed. They remained vigilant of their surroundings, all of them slightly tense. Kaneomi timidly spoke up and said, “Um, Akitsu-sama, I apologize for bringing you into my mess.”

“Oh, no, not at all. Like I said earlier, I got my own reasons to help out.” Somegorou waved a hand, making a show of not minding.

He probably honestly didn’t mind, given his nature. But it remained true that he had no reason to risk his life like this, unlike Jinya who’d been properly commissioned and paid. Kaneomi seemed hung up over that.

“I *really* don’t mind, ya know? I feel bad about what happened to Kazusa. I’m just trying to make amends.” He scratched his cheek, chuckling a bit. His voice had a hint of self-deprecation to it, however.

That alone didn’t seem to resolve Kaneomi’s feelings, but she apologized only

once more, then relented. Kazusa's name carried that much weight for them both.

"Kazusa… The Nagumo of the Demonic Sword?" Jinya asked.

"That's the one. The Nagumo and the Kukami of the Magatama are among the most famous of all the spirit hunter families. I fought side by side with Kazusa many times. I was still young then, sprightlier than I am now…" Somegorou's voice sounded nostalgic, or at least it would have if it weren't so sorrowful. Kazusa's death had left a deep scar on him. "Just when I was thinking I hadn't seen her in a while, I learned she had been killed by a demon… I guess I wish I could've done more for her." Maybe she would still be alive if he had done things differently. It was meaningless to think about it so late after the fact, but he couldn't help but wonder. "That's why I tagged along today."

Even if it weren't immediately apparent, Somegorou had his own motive for facing the night parade. Jinya had tried to distance him from the fight without even thinking of that. Feeling sorry, he bowed his head slightly in apology. "I see. I had no idea you had your own reason to fight."

"Not a particularly grand one or anything, mind you." Somegorou took the apology in stride, remaining aloof and bringing the topic to a close.

That got rid of one of Jinya's hang-ups, but a nagging question took its place now that he'd heard Somegorou talk about the past.

"Kaneomi, something's been bothering me about what you and Somegorou said…" Jinya began.

"Yes?"

"You told me you first met Nagumo Kazusa when she was twelve years old."

"That's right."

"How long ago was that exactly?"

It didn't add up no matter how you thought about it. From what he'd heard, Somegorou was still in his thirties around the time Kazusa was alive, which

meant she was likely killed around the end of the Edo period or early Meiji era. But Kaneomi looked to be no older than seventeen or eighteen when Jinya first met her. She was much too young to have served as her sword teacher.

“That’s…hard to answer,” Kaneomi said.

“I see. Your lack of physical change seems to tell me enough, though. Or am I mistaken?”

Despite sharing a roof, the two had avoided intruding into one another’s business all these years. That was why he chose not to point out that her appearance hadn’t changed much at all since they first met—she didn’t seem to age in the slightest. This could all be easily explained if she were a demon, of course.

To his surprise, she shook her head. “I am not a demon.”

“Then what?”

“I will tell you one of these days… No, when we capture Jishibari and finish everything. But not now.”

She proved more stubborn than he’d expected. It didn’t seem like he would get anything out of her even if he pressed further, so he let it go. “All right. That’s fine by me.”

“Thank you.”

He accepted the deal, thinking of it as another reason to bring this matter to a close. Then he glared into the darkness.

“Oh, is it time?” Somegorou remarked.

“Apparently so,” Jinya replied.

As though waiting for the right timing, the night began to shift. A lukewarm breeze blew, carrying the sound of breathing along with it. Low groans overlapped, and a cascade of footfalls echoed. A figure emerged slowly from the darkness, soon followed by many more, until eventually the street was packed end to end. The starlight made their features clear: hideous, all of them.

Some stood seven shaku tall, and others were no taller than children. Some had missing body parts and crawled along the ground instead of walking. They were all peculiar in their own ways, but each one could be described as a demon.

It was a Night Parade of a Hundred Demons, a legendary procession of spirits that was said to be a sinister omen.

“Say, is it just me or are they all lookin’ at us?” Somegorou asked.

The countless demons had their gazes fixed on the three. Their growls made the earth tremble, and they seemed ready to pounce at any moment.

“Perhaps we haven’t been as pious as they’d like?” Jinya said.

“Your jokes suck, my friend,” Somegorou replied exasperatedly.

Many stories about night parades ended with characters escaping danger by chanting sutras or using religious talismans. In that sense, such tales were less ghost stories and more religious teachings—hence Jinya’s joke.

Jinya cleared his throat, understanding full well that such jokes didn’t suit him.

“Well, well. What familiar faces we have here,” a voice abruptly called out, making the relaxed air go taut.

Jinya drew his blade and took up a stance, holding his sword off to his side and glaring at the demons. The voice was familiar, but not one he had pleasant memories of. Still, he would be lying if he said he didn’t want to meet her.

A young woman stood among the demons. Her face was a mirror image of Kaneomi’s, and she wore a haori coat. She looked at the three with dull red eyes and a mocking grin. “It’s been a while.”

“Jishibari. At last, we meet again,” Kaneomi said.

“You’re a real persistent woman, aren’t you? Don’t you know gentlemen are turned off by such clinginess?”

Kaneomi trembled slightly. Not out of fear but out of another emotion she

had difficulty suppressing.

In contrast, Jishibari was the image of composure. Even as she spoke, she drew her left foot back slightly, using her long hakama pants to hide the shifting of her center of gravity. She was readying herself despite the suddenness of their encounter. She had grown in the past five years.

“You seem well, Uncle,” Jishibari said.

“Could you not call me that?” Jinya replied.

“But don’t you let Himawari-neesan call you that? Then again, I hear you’re soft on her. Are you trying to be like Hikaru Genji?” She put a finger to her lips and cocked her head in mock wonder. Like before, she could easily pass for a normal woman. Jinya wished his enemies would display their ugliness more outwardly—they’d be easier to kill then.

“Is it wrong of me to be soft on children?” Jinya asked.

“Oh my. You’re calmer than I expected. I thought you’d be riled up at that.”

“I’m not so green that I’d fall for cheap provocations. If anything, it’s charming to see a child like you try to act mature.”

Jishibari showed no sign of agitation. Before, she would have been furious at being treated like a child, but now she watched the group’s every move, not taking her eyes off the three for even a moment.

“You’re just as close to Nomari-chan as ever, aren’t you, Uncle? Hmph.” A young girl appeared at that moment, puffing her cheeks out in irritation. It was Himawari, Magatsume’s eldest daughter, riding the shoulders of a remarkably massive demon taller than eight shaku. She ran her fingers through her soft, wavy, chestnut-brown hair and looked down with big, childish eyes. Her expression was pouting rather than malicious.

“So the sisters have gathered. Tell me, what is Magatsume plotting?” Jinya asked.

“Plotting? Don’t make it sound like Mother’s up to something sinister. She’s

just trying to bring her long-held wish to life, and we're helping her," Himawari answered.

That sounded well and good on the surface, but Magatsume's methods had been unconscionable so far. She'd ordered Jishibari to hunt humans, made Naotsugu a demon, gathered corpses, and now made a parade of demons. Her objective remained unknown, but it couldn't be anything decent.

"What's the plan?" Kaneomi asked. She looked at the bevy of demons and swallowed nervously. Jinya and Somegorou didn't feel any particular pressure, though.

"Well, we won't get anywhere without taking care of the small fry first," Somegorou said. "If we're lucky, then maybe Jishibari will get impatient and come forward herself."

"Right. For now, handling these other demons is our only option," Jinya said.

The distance between them and Jishibari wasn't far, but countless demons were shuffling closer to block the path. There would be no proceeding unless they dealt with them first.

"Himawari, Jishibari," Jinya began, "I don't know what you two have been up to, but we'll be putting a stop to it."

There was only one thing left to do. Jinya stretched his left arm out toward the demons, and Somegorou reached into the folds of his clothes.

Jinya had spoken his words forcefully, but the sisters replied in a nonchalant fashion.

"You're welcome to try," Jishibari said.

"We'll play with you as much as you want, Uncle," Himawari said.

Jishibari's lips curled into a sneer, and her gaze turned sharp. As if that were a signal, the many demons then descended on the three like an avalanche. The fiends' ferocity seemed to warp the very air, but the group remained calm.

"Come, *Dog Spirits*."

“Go, paper swallow.”

Three dogs formed from the shadows and a swallow flew forth, sharp like a blade. Together they attacked the demons, making quick work of the ones in front. Even in a large group like this, petty demons remained just that—petty.

“Kaneomi, just focus on defending yourself,” Jinya said.

“But—”

Somegorou softly cut off Kaneomi, saying, “Leave the small fry to us. You got bigger fish to catch, don’t ya? Save your strength till then.”

“…All right.” She relented with some reluctance, drawing her sword and taking a stance but not moving.

Relieved she’d listened, Jinya turned his attention back to the demons with a fierce glare. “Jishibari has the power to control chains and bind the actions of others with them. Be careful.”

“Roger that. Shall we get to it, then?” Somegorou said. He ran forward, a number of swallows following in the air.

Jinya gritted his teeth, determined to not make a fool of himself against Jishibari like he had last time. He attacked, slicing off heads, cutting through midriffs, diagonally slashing torsos, piercing hearts, and bisecting bodies. A mountain of demon corpses formed.

“Paper swallow.” A swallow pierced a demon’s body, adding to the body count.

They were winning against the hundred-something creatures; but then again, they were all lesser demons. Occasionally there was a stronger one among the bunch, but even those were nothing compared to the truly formidable opponents Jinya had faced in the past.

After about thirty demons had been killed, the two backed away and regrouped, standing back-to-back and staying wary of their surroundings. The demons watched them with no move to attack, perhaps realizing that their

offense wasn't working.

In the ensuing interval, Somegorou said, "Something's off."

Jinya had just been thinking the same thing. "It's a bit weird they're this weak when Magatsume went out of her way to make them."

"You noticed too?"

Jishibari hunted people under Magatsume's orders, Naotsugu gathered corpses to repay the favor he owed, and now a night parade of demons had appeared. It didn't take much effort to guess where they had been sourced from. The pieces fit together nicely, but there was just one thing out of place. The demons comprising the night parade were weak, even more so than naturally occurring lesser demons. Was it really worth the effort to make all of them?

"What's the point of gathering all those dead bodies just to make such useless small fry?" Somegorou wondered out loud.

"Maybe these were just the first attempts?" Jinya suggested.

"Could be… Or maybe just makin' demons was their goal to begin with?" Somegorou looked sharply at the demons, a slight rage in his eyes—understandably so. Human life had been toyed with. "No matter why they were made, these certainly all seem to be the failures of the bunch. Perhaps the night parade was just a gimmick to get someone to dispose of them."

"But what could Magatsume be trying to do by gathering bodies to make demons?"

"Hmm, I can't say. Guess we'll just have to ask Jishibari directly."

"Fair enough."

With the conversation temporarily ending there, Jinya threw himself at the demons again. He killed his first with a horizontal swipe, then reversed his slash upward and killed a second.

The demons didn't give up, though. A number of them leapt at him, but

Somegorou's artifact spirits curbed their advance. That brief opening was enough. A third, fourth, then a fifth were killed, their heads all lopped off.

Jinya turned around and saw a demon attacking Somegorou from behind. He couldn't use *Flying Blade*, so he instead threw his cherished Yarai, piercing the skull of his sixth victim.

The demons saw Jinya without a weapon and seized the opportunity, approaching him from all sides. But then a swallow flew down, circling around and making mincemeat of the demons before he needed to lift a finger.

Somegorou pulled Yarai out of the dead demon it had pierced and tossed it back to Jinya, who caught it and immediately spun to cut two demons for his seventh and eighth kills.

Just like that, the night parade was quickly culled without a single scratch on the two.

"How monstrous. But then again, you're not human, are you, Uncle? That old man there is far from ordinary himself," Jishibari said.

About half the demons had been cleared away now, making it much easier to see. Jishibari wasn't very far away from them, and it didn't seem like she planned to run.

Her old self would've been on edge here, but she was calm now. She seemed more confident than conceited, as if she had a reason to be certain of her victory.

"Now hold on just one second—why is Jinya 'Uncle,' but I'm 'old man'?" Somegorou frowned, not taking kindly to being called old.

Jishibari was a bit bewildered; she hadn't expected anyone to take issue with that of all things. "Huh? Um, because it just makes sense? Or are you saying you're *not* an old man?"

"Well, no… But aren't ya treating me a lot colder than him?"

"So what if I am? I know him and I don't know you."

“Mmm, I guess, but it just doesn’t sit right with me.” Somegorou continued to grumble. The fact that he continued to eliminate demons with a few artifact spirits as he talked was a testament to his skill, but he seemed to be getting a little careless.

“Are you pulling my leg?” Jishibari asked.

“Not at all. I just think it’s a tad harsh to call someone an ‘old man.’ Don’t ya think you could be a little more considerate?”

“You do realize we’re enemies here, right?”

The mood was light despite the night parade. Of course, Somegorou wasn’t actually getting careless—he remained aware of his surroundings and continued to eliminate demons while helping Jinya out on the side. But from his words alone, he didn’t seem to be taking things all too seriously.

From behind, Kaneomi gave him a cold glare. Sternly, she said, “Akitsu-sama, please don’t be foolish.”

“Urk… Sorry, I just thought you were a little tense is all.” He flashed an awkward, stiff smile.

It probably irked Kaneomi to no end to see Somegorou talk so casually with Jishibari, her master’s killer. Not wanting to get caught in the crossfire, Jinya kept his mouth shut—he wasn’t much better given how he interacted with Himawari. Somegorou looked at him, pleading for help, but he pretended not to notice.

“You’re an amusing lot,” Jishibari said.

“You’re not counting me there, are you?” Jinya asked.

“But I am, Uncle. And I’m sure Himawari-neesan would agree with me.” She showed Jinya a smile that had no place in a battle, then laughed at his dumbfounded expression. Once her laughter subsided, she fixed a cold, cruel gaze on Kaneomi. “I’m getting tired of having to look at *you*, though. What do you say we settle this once and for all?” She exuded a bewitching malice

unthinkable for her apparent age. She was finally revealing her true demon nature.

“What are you suggesting?” Kaneomi asked.

“A duel, me and you. That’s what you want, right? A chance to avenge your master without anyone getting in the way?” That was indeed Kaneomi’s one and only desire. “Or are you too scared? I mean, it’s fine if you are. Go ahead and keep batting your eyes at those men to get them to do everything for you like the helpless maiden you are.”

Kaneomi knew she was no match for Jishibari, but she took a step forward anyway.

“Don’t. She’s only trying to provoke you,” Jinya warned.

“I know. But I cannot help myself,” Kaneomi said. Perhaps it was inevitable. If she were the type of person to just stand still after being mocked, she wouldn’t have been there in the first place.

Jishibari gave a bewitching grin and disappeared into the crowd of demons with Kaneomi giving chase. Jinya and Somegorou tried to follow, but Himawari blocked their path. “Not so fast.”

They wondered if the sky had clouded but quickly realized it was just the figure of a massive demon around nine shaku in height blotting out the starlight. Himawari rode on the creature’s shoulders. It swung a fist at the two men wildly, and they jumped back to dodge.

The strength and speed of this demon was one or two full degrees higher than the small fry from earlier. Jinya and Somegorou fixed their stances, warily watching the demon. Its eyes were hollow, showing no sign of thought. From atop its shoulders, Himawari smiled just as happily as ever.

“Move,” Jinya demanded.

“No can do. Mother is a little interested in getting Kaneomi for herself, you see,” Himawari said, probably referring to the demonic sword Yatonomori

Kaneomi.

“So the night parade was just a decoy?”

“Indeed. We figured Kaneomi-san would come running with you in tow if Jishibari made herself known. Two birds with one stone.”

Magatsume’s daughters had dangled bait before their eyes, and Jinya and the rest had been more than happy to take it. Separating Kaneomi from the group like this had been their aim from the start.

Jinya gritted his teeth. They had been played.

“Oh? From the sound of things, I take it this Magatsume person is after Jinya?” Somegorou said, maintaining his usual aloof tone. He understood they’d been had, but his mind was set on probing for more information. Based on Himawari’s words just now, it sounded like Magatsume was after both Yatonomori Kaneomi and Jinya.

“Of course. Mother is just obsessed with Uncle.”

“Is that right? Even so, you sisters seem *awfully* fond of him.” Somegorou was fishing for a reaction, and he got it. Himawari looked bewildered for a moment, and it didn’t seem like she was faking.

She said, “Um, I’ve been wondering for a while now… Do you really think it’s strange that Jishibari and I call Jinya ‘Uncle’?”

Jinya found her question odd but answered it plainly, perhaps because he had a daughter near her age. “I do think it’s a little overfamiliar between enemies.”

“I suppose, but still…” She puffed her cheeks out, perhaps hoping Jinya would have said otherwise. She really looked like nothing more than an ordinary child based on her appearance and the way she pouted. But what she said next felt like an unexpected punch to Jinya’s temple.

“I’m pretty sure it’s normal to call your mother’s brother ‘Uncle.’”

Jinya’s vision went white, his thoughts coming to a halt. He couldn’t make sense of her words for a moment or two. But slowly, after a few beats passed,

his mind began to process them. Why hadn't he tied the current ongoing events to the demon woman who'd made Snow's Memory in Edo?

"*Magatsume*… So that's why…"

In the Shinto pantheon, there are evil gods known as Magatsuhi no Kami—Gods Who Bring Calamity. *Maga* meant "calamity," *tsu* meant "bringer," and *me* was archaic for "woman." Hence, *Magatsume* could mean "The Woman Who Brings Calamity."

Jinya knew of one woman who'd sworn to bring calamity to mankind in the far future.

"I see. I suppose that *would* make me your uncle," he said.

She'd been active this whole time, plotting from the shadows. The creation of Snow's Memory, ordering Jishibari to hunt humans, changing Naotsugu into a demon, forming the night parade—all of it was *her* doing.

"But of course, Uncle *Jinta*."

It's you, isn't it—Suzune?

4

"HM, I GUESS this should be far enough," Jishibari said nonchalantly.

Kaneomi had followed her to Ichijyou Modoribashi Bridge, which spanned the Horikawa River. The night had grown darker, and the din of fighting was distant. A lukewarm breeze passed, covering Kaneomi's skin in goosebumps. She glared at her sworn enemy. Back when they fought on Gojo Ohashi Bridge, Jinya had taken a critical hit for her. She was on her own now—but she would neither run nor let Jishibari escape. "You will pay for taking Kazusa-sama from me."

There was a tale titled "Scroll of the Sword," part of the greater *Tale of the Heike* story. In it, a man by the name of Watanabe Tsuna—one of the Four Heavenly Kings, legendary retainers of Minamoto no Yorimitsu—was walking

along Ichijyou Modoribashi Bridge when he came across a beautiful woman who asked him to walk her home because the night was late and she was afraid to go alone. Watanabe Tsuna found it strange that a woman would be out so late on her own, but he accepted, dismounting his horse to allow her to ride. But as soon as he did so, the woman revealed herself to be a demon and grabbed him by the hair, then flew off toward Atagoyama Mountain. However, he managed to slice her arm off with his sword, thus escaping.

Therefore, the Ichijyou Modoribashi Bridge on which Kaneomi and Jishibari now stood could be called the place where a legendary swordsman cut off a demon's arm. Of course, Kaneomi wasn't arrogant enough to think that would influence her chances. Her skill was nowhere near that of a legendary swordsman. But if she couldn't take at least an arm from Jishibari, she had no right to call Kazusa her master.

"Oh? But am I really to blame? Weren't you the one who failed to protect her?" Jishibari taunted.

She had a point. Kazusa and Jishibari had both fought with their lives equally on the line. One could hardly begrudge the other for killing their would-be killer. If Kaneomi were to blame anyone, it should be herself for failing to protect her master.

Kaneomi had served Kazusa as her sword, and she wanted to remain in that role for as long as she could. But she'd still failed to protect Kazusa, then failed to avenge her. She gained nothing to show for it as time passed until an era arrived that allowed neither swords nor vengeance. The very world itself was turned against Kaneomi and her revenge.

"Yes, I am aware. But I shall have you return Kazusa-sama's soul nevertheless."

Despite it all, she could not stray from the path she had chosen. Jishibari had taken her master's soul, and that was unacceptable.

"You think you can beat me? *You?*" Jishibari sneered.

Fury filled Kaneomi's eyes, but she restrained herself and took up a stance as calmly as possible, holding her sword at eye level. "I do. I am a sword that exists for such a purpose."

The new era may have found fault in Kaneomi's convictions, but they remained, nonetheless.

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"I'm now a father *and* an uncle, huh? I guess I'm getting old," Jinya said. It was a humid summer night, but his heart was like ice. The revelation of this new truth was painful, but he had grown too old to be shocked or flustered. He fixed his gaze on Himawari, who was sitting on a giant demon's shoulders, and flatly said, "But you got one thing wrong. My name is Jin*ya*, not Jin*ta*."

The day he was entrusted with Yarai, he took its "ya" kanji for his own name as well. The new life he'd led since then had been fraught with error, but the bits of happiness he'd found along the way were meaningful. He was proud of the person he'd become, of *Jinya*.

"Is that right? But Mother says your name is Jinta."

So he still remained Jinta to Suzune. She, the one who was trying to become the Demon God, still longed for her brother. Even after learning that, he felt nothing but hatred stir in him. At this point, his hate for her was less of an emotion and more of a natural process of his demon body, akin to breathing. He felt deeply saddened by what he had become.

"Is that so? I'm afraid we don't have any more time to waste talking, though. We'll be forcing our way through," he said. He shook off his mawkish feelings and lowered his stance. If he didn't hurry, something would happen that couldn't be undone.

The crowd of demons stood shoulder to shoulder, cutting off any escape routes. The only way to chase after Kaneomi would be to deal with the giant demon blocking the path.

“It won’t be easy, you know. This demon here is strong. Not enough to be called a success but still pretty strong,” Himawari said.

“Is that right? Maybe it’d like to have a go at me?” With no tension in his voice whatsoever, Somegorou stepped forward in front of Jinya. From the folds of his clothes, he took out a dagger Jinya had seen before and grinned—not out of arrogance but fearlessness. A pressure emanated off his back that made Jinya gulp.

“Somegorou?”

“I’ll handle the big guy. Take care of the small fry for me.”

“Are you sure?”

“’Course. Honestly, I ain’t much suited for fightin’ groups in the first place.”

Somegorou seemed sure of himself. He was an old man now, but he was still the third Akitsu. He wasn’t foolish enough to charge in without thinking, nor was he the type to misread an opponent’s strength. That much didn’t need to be said between the two.

“That Kaneomi is impatient, so I doubt we’ve got much time. Yer better suited for handlin’ numbers, so I’ll take the big guy. That’s our best way to go here,” he said. He didn’t seem to be lying, but it sounded like there was more to his decision. He probably didn’t want Jinya to fight his niece, Himawari. Even to a demon like Jinya, he showed plenty of human consideration. Akitsu Somegorou was that kind of man.

“So you will be fighting me, then?” Himawari said. She sounded surprised but quickly shifted her focus to Somegorou.

“That’s right, missy. Sorry yer stuck with me and not your darling uncle.”

“I won’t say I’m not disappointed, but it’s a little embarrassing when you put it like that!”

Even while exchanging jokes, the two had already begun shifting, gauging the distance between themselves. The fight had already begun.

“…Thank you,” Jinya said, looking at his feet. He was grateful for Somegorou’s kindness but felt a bit ashamed at the same time. Jinya hadn’t wanted to burden Somegorou at all, yet here he was, stepping up like it was only natural. Jinya had found himself a good friend. He swore not to let Somegorou’s kindness go to waste.

“Don’t worry ’bout it. Think ya can handle the rest?”

“Yeah. They won’t get in your way.”

They shared a nod, then focused on their respective opponents. Jinya went for the crowd of demons without hesitating. The two were in a predicament, but for the first time in a long while, he felt he could move forward without worrying about anything else.

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Somegorou gave Jinya one last glance before taking a short pause, then he fixed his gaze on the giant demon before him. He pointed the dagger in his hands forward.

“Just out of curiosity, do you actually intend to fight with that dagger?” Himawari asked, a little bewildered. Just one glance at Somegorou showed that he didn’t engage in martial arts. The fact that he was holding a dagger anyway made it seem like he was seriously underestimating her.

“I do. Might be a bit of a waste to use it on that big oaf of yours there, though.”

“Big oaf? I’ll have you know this demon here really is strong. And you don’t strike me as someone who knows how to fight with a blade.”

“Aha ha, don’t be stupid. Why would an artifact spirit user try an’ act like a swordsman?”

Somegorou was about to display his full strength as an artifact spirit user. In the past, he’d avoided doing so in front of Jinya. He used to be hesitant to reveal his ace in the hole because he thought he might have to fight Jinya, a

demon, one day. But the two had known one another for a long time now, and Somegorou was no longer wary of him. Jinya could look as much as he wanted. The tiny dagger in Somegorou's hands was, in fact, the strongest weapon he had.

"Shall we then, little missy?"

Long ago, Xuanzong—emperor of the Tang dynasty—was bedridden with a disease. In his high fever, he had a dream in which a great demon appeared and eliminated the demons afflicting his body. Xuanzong went on to declare his savior a god of plague-quelling. Stories of the great demon later reached Japan, where dolls with his likeness would be made for Boys' Day, which is now known as Children's Day. The dagger in Somegorou's hand was actually the sword for one such doll, and the artifact spirit it manifested was…

"Come forth, Shouki-sama."

Shouki. The plague-quelling, demon-slaying demon god.

"Well now…" In the middle of his fight with the crowd of demons, Jinya caught his breath in awe at the manifestation of the great bearded demon. Shouki was just that powerful of an artifact spirit. He was a slayer of countless demons, as well as the pride of Akitsu Somegorou the Third.

"How wonderful," Himawari said in genuine admiration. Even she seemed to sense his overwhelming power.

Amused, Somegorou let out a good laugh before turning serious and adopting a grim expression. "Isn't he? But I think it's about time we put an end to this."

"What a coincidence. I was feeling quite the same way." Himawari didn't seem particularly fazed, but she did exercise caution. She nimbly hopped off her giant demon's shoulders. The moment her feet touched the ground, the demon charged forth.

A billow of dirt rose into the air, and the earth shook so intensely that it seemed to growl. The giant demon's charge was wild, and the air roared as it

approached. It was a charge backed by weight and muscle alone. It prepared to thrust out a fist, no doubt lethal enough to bore a hole straight through a human. Even so, Somegorou didn't feel the slightest bit of fear.

"Shouki-sama has no special abilities of his own…" he began.

The giant demon closed the distance in the blink of an eye, its arm a blur. The coming punch was simply that fast. Wind tore as the giant demon set its sights on Shouki. A thunderous impact seemed to rattle the very night, making the force of the punch clear to all.

"…Instead, he's just exceptionally strong."

Shouki didn't budge in the slightest. He effortlessly blocked the demon's punch with his sword and then raised the blade. There was no trick at play. No technique, no special ability. The demon's punch was warded off by old-fashioned brawn alone. Shouki's body twisted back as it stored up strength, then came to a halt.

"End it."

Shouki unleashed like a drawn bow at Somegorou's command. Rather than an arrow, he fired off a lightning-quick thrust.

There was no sound. Instead, a gaping hole formed unceremoniously on the giant demon's torso.

The sound of impact came after a moment's delay, just as the great demon feebly dropped to its knees.

In a mere instant, the fight was settled.

"What do you think, missy? I'm not half-bad either, eh?" Somegorou joked. He wasn't tired in the least. He felt as if he had merely swatted a fly away.

Himawari stared at the collapsed demon. Her eyes were emotionless, carrying neither despair at defeat nor fear toward her enemy. After some time passed, she began to speak softly and leisurely.

"My mother began by creating a liquor that could change humans into

demons.”

Her lips formed a subdued smile, one out of place on such a young face. Somegorou frowned, but she paid him no mind and matter-of-factly continued to talk about something that seemed unrelated to the matter at hand.

“It was a liquor that instilled and agitated hatred in the hearts of humans. She used a fitting corpse. But Uncle took issue with the liquor, so he did away with the corpse and that was that.”

Snow’s Memory. Somegorou had played a part in settling that incident too. Now that he thought back on it, he recalled Jinya becoming unusually hostile at the mention of a certain blonde-haired woman. Somegorou was intelligent enough to connect the dots.

Himawari continued, “Then my mother tried abducting humans and toying with their bodies until they became demons. Many died in the process, so the results weren’t great. Next, she tried working with the dead—or rather, the souls of the dead—using their emotions. She gathered negative sentiments into one place and created man-made demons from nothingness. Man-made? … Demon-made? Regardless, she made demons that didn’t rely on bodies. The results were favorable, giving us the many demons you see now.”

Demons could be born in many ways. A woman might be violated by a demon and give birth to its child, two demons could have a child of their own, and occasionally demons formed naturally by themselves. But no matter how a demon came into being, the fact that they were emotions given flesh always ran true. Spirits were the manifestation of emotions, good and bad, which was precisely why they had powers beyond reason. It appeared Magatsume had developed a method of twisting negative emotions and souls into the shape of a demon.

“So what do you plan on doing with all these demons you’ve made, then?” Somegorou asked. “Ain’t it a bit of a waste having ’em die like this after all that effort?”

“Not at all. In the first place, making demons wasn’t my mother’s goal. It was simply a step in the process.” Himawari’s smile was soft, without a hint of malice or wickedness. She looked as pure as could be. “Humans are corrupted into demons by nothing other than their very own emotions. Hence, the art of making demons is the art of controlling emotions. It follows, then, that if one masters the art of making demons, they could master the art of controlling emotions, right?”

Somegorou was so caught up in her words that he grew inattentive to his surroundings.

“Somegorou!” Jinya yelled as he cut through the demons.

The man had no time to wonder what was wrong. Before he realized it, the giant demon he had killed was on its feet and charging at him again. The hole Shouki had made in its torso was gone. Its movements were as brisk as before, and one of its fists swung toward Somegorou.

“Wha—?!” He quickly moved Shouki and cut off the demon’s arm, then prepared an attack, aiming for the heart to kill the demon again—this time for certain.

Shouki thrust forward, hitting his target. Somegorou didn’t stop there, however; next Shouki slashed upward, sending blood flying. It was a clean blow, but he kept a wary eye on the demon’s collapsed corpse. Its heart was pierced; by all means it should’ve been dead. But no white vapor rose from its body.

“…Now, what the hell is this?” He gave a strained smile.

The demon’s wounds were beginning to seal up on their own. Veins stretched like roots, flesh squirmed and propagated, and even the pierced heart started to reform. The demon’s arm reattached itself, and the creature stopped twitching where it lay. It lifted its face and stared at Somegorou with bright, red eyes. Moments later, it stood up on its feet like nothing had happened.

“This demon has the power of healing… Recovery? Regeneration? Hmm, it doesn’t have that ring I’m looking for. I’ll have to brainstorm this a bit.”

Himawari put a finger to her lips and cocked her head in thought. Such behavior was oddly childish, terribly cute, and paradoxically terrifying.

Recovering from those injuries, especially in such a short span of time, was impossible even for a demon. That meant it had to have a regenerative ability on par with revival. Himawari seemed to place stock in the demon, so this spectacle probably had something to do with Magatsume's objective…the ability to freely create demon abilities.

"…A demon's ability ain't somethin' inborn but a wish. The heart's unfulfilled desires take the form of a demon ability. Heh, so that's what's going on. That mother of yours wasn't makin' demons but demon abilities."

The giant demon, now fully healed, attacked once more. Somegorou blocked its fist with Shouki, then wrapped around its right side. The demon made a wide swipe with its arm. It was unclear how much it understood what was going on.

"Whoa!" Somegorou exclaimed.

Shouki responded by cutting the demon's arm off, but it simply picked its arm up and placed it back on the wound, where it immediately reattached itself. It took all of three seconds for it to heal. At this rate, they would only be repeating a cycle of cutting and healing over and over.

"Hmm… That's not quite right," Himawari said.

The giant demon was by no means a strong opponent. It could only attack in simple ways like punching, charging, or swiping its arms, which meant Somegorou didn't need to divert all his attention to it. Keeping his eyes on the demon, he focused on Himawari's voice.

She continued, "My mother didn't want to create demons or their abilities; she wanted to make a heart."

"A heart?" he said in disbelief. That was an unexpected thing to hear after Magatsume had employed vicious means and created a whole parade of demons. "A heart, eh? I don't get it. What's the point of makin' such a thing?"

“You’ll have to ask my mother that yourself.” Himawari sounded as if she didn’t know, was pretending she didn’t know, and was hiding what she knew all at the same time.

“Huh. You’re willin’ to do all this work without knowin’ what yer mother is after?”

“It doesn’t matter whether I know or not. It’s what my mother wishes. Is it so odd that I want to see her wish granted?”

“Ha ha, I suppose not. I’ll bet Magatsume’s real happy to have such a good daughter.”

“Thank you very much.” Himawari smiled happily at the praise. She was shrewder than her childlike appearance let on, continuing to speak openly while still hiding quite a bit. The giant demon was proving to be a greater annoyance than expected as well.

The air roared once more as the hulking beast charged. Shouki punched it away, forcibly creating distance. It got up again, however, its wounds healed in an instant. It had strength and speed, and injuries couldn’t stop it. It wasn’t exceptional by any means, but it was strong enough. The idea that Magatsume might create an army of such creatures was worrying.

“But a single one is hardly a problem at all,” Somegorou murmured to himself. He pointed his dagger at the giant demon. His words weren’t a bluff: He knew his opponent’s strength yet still maintained his aloof composure. “Thanks for the chitchat, missy, but we’re in a bit of a hurry. It’s time for me to put an end to this.”

“You want to keep fighting? You’ve seen this demon’s ability for yourself already. Do you really think you can defeat it?” Himawari questioned. She probably saw this fight as a battle of endurance. The giant demon could heal from any injury, but the same couldn’t be said for Somegorou. He was doing fine now, but his old age meant his stamina would hit its limit eventually. The longer the fight dragged on, the worse his prospects would become. As far as

Himawari was concerned, the battle's outcome had already been settled.

"I'll admit that humans are way more brittle than you demons," Somegorou began. "But we're still tougher than you think. I'm not giving up that easily."

He foresaw a different outcome to the battle than she did. Akitsu Somegorou the Third wasn't about to lose to a demon of such a low level.

"I'm guessing you still have a trick up your sleeve?" Himawari said.

"Not at all. Like I said earlier, Shouki-sama has no special abilities to speak of whatsoever. He can only attack head-on." Somegorou grinned meanly.

To repeat once more, Shouki had no special abilities of his own. Unlike the other artifact spirits like the lucky sparrow, which could raise defenses; the dog spirits with their regeneration; and the clam shell and its mirages, Shouki alone was without any special power. He didn't have the long range of the paper swallow, being able to reach only one ken[3] away, and the dagger used to summon him was fairly heavy and a bit difficult to use. But despite all that, Shouki remained Somegorou's trump card—and Himawari was about to find out why.

"Shall we?"

Somegorou ran forward at a speed not quite fast enough to be called a dash. He used Shouki to brush aside the giant demon's coming attack as he closed the distance. Then he swung at the demon's cranium with Shouki, cutting its head in two down the middle. The contents of the skull flew out, but the demon continued to squirm.

"It's pointless. Crushing its skull won't stop it," Himawari said.

Somegorou didn't care what she had to say. The demon's smashed skull began to heal, but Shouki's sword cut away at it before it could fully recover. It slashed straight vertically down, horizontally across, diagonally down, and back diagonally up. The skull was left in pieces, and the demon was headless.

"Still pointless."

“Oh, be quiet!” Somegorou barked, not stopping his attacks.

The demon’s hands reached out as though searching for its head, but Somegorou wouldn’t give it time to gather the pieces. He cut the demon’s arms off with Shouki, then did the same to the legs it was trying to walk forward with. Before the demon could even fall to the ground, he pierced its heart.

He slashed open its chest and ripped into its entrails, gouged flesh, and crushed bone. With sword and fist, Shouki made mincemeat of the demon’s entire body. Fresh blood sprayed high, and a lukewarm red mist formed in the air.

Himawari had assumed that this battle would only end in Somegorou’s eventual exhaustion and defeat, but for Somegorou, this was a battle of speed. He had to kill the demon faster and more thoroughly than it could heal. Hence, he did not stop his strikes. Without any device or trick up his sleeve, he attacked head on with the ferocity of a cyclone. The demon’s body continued to regenerate, but it was carved away at an even greater speed. The red mist grew thicker with the night as its backdrop, and a white mist gradually mixed in with it after a while.

“Impossible…” Himawari murmured in disbelief.

Somegorou said nothing. His entire attention was diverted to cutting and crushing. The white mist wasn’t a mist at all but the vapor formed from the demon’s body failing to maintain its shape. Victory was in sight, and the ferocity of the cyclone only intensified.

“This time, it’s over for real!” Somegorou made one last flurry with Shouki: slashing, severing, thrusting, cleaving, carving, piercing, gouging. At a speed the eye could barely follow, Shouki unleashed countless sword strikes on the demon.

The demon had long since lost its shape. It was left in so many pieces that one couldn’t tell it had been a demon at all. Only a pile of blood and flesh was left on the ground.

A white vapor rose from the flesh, and the scent of rust wafted through the air filled with red mist.

“Would ya look at that? The demon was nothin’ more than a big oaf after all.” Somegorou, now a gruesome bloody mess, let out one of his usual uproarious laughs.

It was an absolute, flawless victory.

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“Oh, you finished over there as well?”

“Yeah. Nothing but small fry.”

Though they’d both cleared out their opponents, neither Jinya nor Somegorou relaxed their attention.

Jinya glanced at the ground. The giant demon’s flesh had melted away, but the scattered blood still remained. He had known about how useful the Akitsu artifact spirits were, but Shouki seemed far and away more powerful than the rest.

“Did I overdo it?” Somegorou asked.

“It should be fine.”

Not a single demon remained. The night parade had been squashed in just a single night, leaving only Himawari and Jishibari.

“Wait, now where’d that little missy go? Ah, already all the way over there, eh?”

Himawari stood a distance away, watching the two from afar. She’d apparently kept a path to retreat down for herself. “I’m surprised. I didn’t think I’d be beaten so one-sidedly. You’re amazing, Uncle. And you too, Akitsu-san.”

“So, what now? You turnin’ tail?” Somegorou asked.

“That I am. I do believe I’ve bought enough time already.” She smiled innocently, despite the gruesome, gory scene sprawled out before her. She

didn’t resemble a villain at all—if anything, the two men glaring daggers at her looked like the villainous ones here. But she was still Suzune’s daughter. Jinya was willing to do *whatever* it took to make her spit out the location of her mother.

“Don’t.” Somegorou calmly shook his head, perhaps sensing the unrest that Jinya was feeling.

Jinya thought it over once more and wanted to kick himself. If Somegorou hadn’t spoken up, he would likely have chased after Suzune. They had lost enough time dealing with the night parade as it was, and they didn’t have any more time to waste getting to Kaneomi.

“Himawari… Tell me, where is Su… Where is Magatsume?” Unable to abandon the issue entirely, Jinya called out to Himawari. He lived for the sake of stopping Suzune. Even if this wasn’t the right time for him to pursue that, there were still some things he couldn’t pass up.

“I cannot answer that. Oh, but there is one thing I should mention.” Himawari looked sweetly at Jinya as though she’d already forgotten the fight that had just occurred. “I was born from my mother, but I have no father.”

“What do you mean?”

“The same goes for Jishibari. We sisters are discarded parts of our mother that have become demons. In other words, she has no husband. I just thought that was an important thing to mention.”

The meaning of her words eluded him.

Himawari spun around and began to walk away with soft steps, leaving him confused. Then she stopped to look over her shoulder. With affection in her eyes, she said, “Goodbye then, Uncle. Let us meet again soon. Hopefully next time we can take a moment to talk.” She gave a resplendent smile resembling a summer flower, then left, this time in earnest.

There wasn’t a single falsehood in her display of fondness, and that was what

made it perplexing. Just why would the daughter of Suzune be so tender toward Jinya?

“She’s one mysterious little girl.” Somegorou folded his arms in thought, stumped just as much as Jinya was. “I guess it’s not important right now, though. We need to get to Kaneomi.”

There was no point in pondering unanswerable questions; they had real issues to address. Kaneomi should have already started fighting Jishibari. They had to hurry before it was too late.

“Sorry, but could ya go ahead of me? I’ll only slow ya down,” Somegorou said.

“Good call.”

Somegorou may have been skilled in using artifact spirits, but his physical abilities were not at the level of a demon’s. He was fairly exhausted as well. Jinya felt slightly bad, but it was better to proceed without him.

His destination was Ichijyou Modoribashi Bridge, past Ichijyou Street. He sped ahead into the darkness, trying to ignore the unease in his heart.

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By then, the battle at Ichijyou Modoribashi Bridge had already met its end.

They say you never know what can happen in a fight. The right kind of luck can overcome differences in strength; the weak sometimes topple the strong. But one mustn’t misunderstand. Though good luck can occur, it rarely visits those who are unprepared. Only people who train with diligence and plan meticulously can obtain enough luck to overcome the strong. Kaneomi, having discarded all preparations, had no hope of finding luck.

“Ah, jeez…”

The result had been set in stone from the start.

“I expected nothing and I’m *still* disappointed.” Jishibari scoffed as though the whole affair were beneath her.

Kaneomi had lacked any prospect of victory from the very moment she chose to fight Jishibari alone.

She didn't so much as twitch anymore, though she still held her sword in her hand. Her body was pierced straight through by a chain, just as her former master's had been.

5

JISHIBARI, JUST LIKE her older sister Himawari, was a demon born from a discarded fragment of Magatsume's heart.

All of Magatsume's children were born with demon abilities of their own. Demon abilities were not inborn things, however, but manifestations of the unmet desires of the heart. Magatsume's children possessed powers because they had formed from the discarded fragments of Magatsume's heart, which wanted many things that it did not possess. Hence, *Jishibari* was not a power born from a wish of Jishibari's own but from one belonging to Magatsume.

Though they all came from the same mother, there were differences between Magatsume's children. For example, Himawari kept the same childlike appearance she'd had from birth, but Jishibari was born devoid of facial or bodily features. Her sense of self was faint as well, causing her to interact with the world around her by instinct. Magatsume ordered her to hunt humans and tossed her out onto the streets to wander aimlessly.

"Apologies. I have come to slay you."

A young woman by the name of Nagumo Kazusa arrived to kill Jishibari. Most demons needed a strong sense of self to become a superior demon; forming a wish strong enough to gain a demon ability was difficult otherwise. That was why Kazusa let her guard down, thinking Jishibari was just another lesser demon that hadn't even formed an ego. Because the only thought on her mind was killing the demon as painlessly as possible, she revealed an opening.

Seven chains manifested out of nowhere. They slithered, crawled, and struck forth like vipers. It was so sudden that neither Kazusa nor Kaneomi could do anything. A sickening noise was made as they pierced Kazusa's flesh. She couldn't even scream. She let out only a shallow gasp before collapsing.

One of the chains sprang out of Kazusa's corpse and buried itself in the demon's body. Gradually, the featureless demon began to change.

"Jishibari… I…am Jishibari…"

Eyes formed, then a nose, until finally it spoke with a freshly formed mouth, murmuring its name as if to confirm it had one. Its new face bore an uncanny resemblance to Kazusa.

When she saw Jishibari, Kaneomi understood the demon had stolen Kazusa's soul, and not in the metaphorical sense. At the cost of one of her chains, Jishibari had bound Kazusa's soul and thereby gained individuality. Knowing this did nothing for Kaneomi, however. All she could do for the moment was take Kazusa's corpse and flee.

Kaneomi vowed to take back her master's soul. She didn't know if such a thing was possible, of course. There was no telling whether Kazusa could actually come back to life. But the loss of her was too great to prevent Kaneomi from clutching at straws, and so her path was decided.

Such was the tale of a sword that failed to protect a single thing.

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The first sounds Jinya heard as he reached Ichijyou Modoribashi Bridge were the sharp cries of summer insects. Bell crickets, perhaps. The sound they made was simultaneously deafening and serene. It was a humid night at the height of summer, which meant there was no end to the insects' numbers. Jinya gritted his teeth slightly. This place shouldn't be so peaceful, not when a demon and a swordsman were fighting. And yet, amid the insects' cries, there was an oppressive stillness in the air.

“Oh, is that you, Uncle? You sure took your sweet time.”

Jishibari stood at the center of the bridge, seeming bored but composed. Chains swayed around her, one of them connected to a woman at her side. The chain protruded from the left side of the woman’s chest, and its wetness reflected the night with a dark-red hue.

“I’m sure Magatsume-sama will be happy to have this. Of all the Yatonomori Kaneomi blades, made from demon blood, this one is special,” Jishibari said.

Kaneomi had failed. Rather than standing on her own two feet, she hung suspended from the chain. Her heart was pierced, and she didn’t so much as twitch. She was merely a corpse now.

A droplet trickled down the now-crimson chain and eventually fell to the ground. Jinya strained to say, “Jishibari…” His voice trembled unbecomingly for a man of his age. He didn’t want to consider what emotions might be causing his unrest.

Jishibari gave him a fleeting glance and indifferently said, “But I don’t really need this body, now do I?”

Chains wrapped around the motionless Kaneomi’s limbs. A dull sound was heard as her bones snapped. But even then, Kaneomi didn’t let go of her blade. Her body was dropped, but before it could fall to the ground, a chain tore through it once more, piercing her spine and tearing a hole in her innards. The chain effortlessly lifted her up, then tossed her back.

Jishibari turned around and sneered as she watched Kaneomi’s body cruelly roll away. She turned back to Jinya, looking proud of herself.

She had toyed with the corpse of someone he knew. By all logic, such lowlife behavior should have made him angry. But instead, in a low voice only he could hear, he murmured, “It’s a sad thing to grow old.”

There was a time he would have felt enraged to see such a thing, perhaps even attacked without hesitation, but he was decades past that kind of

greenness. He didn't let emotions work him up anymore. He swallowed his anger so he could calmly defeat his opponents, and part of him lamented how levelheaded he had become.

But that didn't stop him from feeling anger.

"Forgive me, Kaneomi. It seems I won't be able to uphold our deal."

Jishibari, a mirror image of Kaneomi, asked, "What do you mean?"

"Kaneomi wanted me to capture you alive so she could get back what you took from her. It'd be one thing if I could finish her job myself, but I cannot." He spoke dispassionately, his voice monotonous.

"Oh? Are you going to give up, then?" Jishibari laughed, misreading his tone as apathy.

"Don't make me laugh, brat." His expression and voice were stiff and cold as steel. "I'm saying there's no point in capturing you alive now. I will kill you and then devour you, leaving nothing behind. You will die to further my own aims, like all the others I've killed up until now."

He drew his sword and took up a stance. The summer night felt a few degrees colder than it had before. Ever so faintly, Jishibari trembled.

"I don't think I can stand looking at that face one more second," he said. He usually adopted a calm and formal manner of speech because he believed that was how a shrine maiden guardian should act. However, his natural personality was a short-tempered, emotional one. He'd grown accustomed to his calm persona over the years, and age had made him less impulsive. But one's true nature did not easily change. "Let me vent on you a bit." His body began to change, his muscles enlarging and his body becoming asymmetrical and grotesque. He had long since shaken off his feelings of anger. All he felt was a calm, controlled rage.

The bloodlust he exuded was as painful as coarse sandpaper. He glared at Jishibari, making her recoil in unmistakable fear.

Jishibari probably viewed fighting as something akin to hunting. Her difficulties in their last battle had only been a result of her inexperience; she could generally overwhelm her targets with ease. But now that she saw she was fighting an inhuman monster like herself, she understood she had been wrong. In a fight, her life was at stake. She swallowed back her fear, her inattention and conceit gone. *"Jishibari."*

Two chains sped forth, links clinking against one another. One aimed for Jinya's shoulder, and the other aimed to entwine around his leg. As the chains moved, she stepped back. *Jishibari* was a powerful ability precisely because it worked at long range. She wouldn't carelessly come near him for no reason.

With *Flying Blade* sealed, Jinya lacked a good method of attacking from afar; and with *Dart* sealed, he couldn't close the distance in one go. He decided he would see how things played out for the time being and extended his left arm.

"Come, *Dog Spirits*."

Three black dogs nimbly leapt at the fast-approaching chains and collided with them. The dogs were sent flying, but in exchange the chains were driven far off course and missed their target.

"Heh. I guess you wouldn't make this easy," Jishibari said. She seemed to be enjoying herself now, having regained some of her calm.

"Don't be stupid."

Chains attacked Jinya once more. He leaned forward and ran with his upper body close to the ground. Since *Dog Spirits* couldn't break her chains, he had no choice but to close the distance somehow.

He weaved and made his way past the chains, then used *Invisibility*. He tried to get within striking range from there, but Jishibari had grown since their last encounter. She immediately brought her chains back near herself for protection —but that didn't change the fact that she couldn't see him. He kicked forth off his left leg and increased his speed.

“Nice try, but I know right where you are.” The moment she spoke, her four chains sped forward. At first, he thought she was just casting a large net because she didn’t know where he was, but he quickly saw from the chains’ trajectories that it was all calculated. They moved in a way that corralled Jinya, closing him in.

One chain snapped like a whip, slicing air. Using every muscle in his body, he swung horizontally and met the strike. Metal clashed with metal. The chain was warded off, and he fell back, taking up a stance once more. Jishibari looked at him with an expression of total composure. “Even if you hide yourself, I can still tell where *my own ability* is.”

One of Jinya’s arms and one of his legs still bore the chain tattoo. So long as they remained, Jishibari would know his location. The only way they would fade was if he killed her. His *Flying Blade* and *Dart* were sealed, *Invisibility* and *Falsehood* were meaningless while she knew his true location, and *Dog Spirits* lacked the kind of punch he needed.

In the short five years since he last saw her, Jishibari had improved greatly, but that didn’t mean he could flee here. She would only grow stronger if he didn’t finish her now. What was more, she was toying with Kaneomi’s body. This wouldn’t end until he killed her.

“You’ve grown strong,” he said.

“Aw, how kind of you to say that, Uncle. Let me thank you with a hug from these chains.” She used two of the chains to guard herself and attacked with the rest.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.” He deftly parried the metal balls of the attacking chains.

She was stronger now, yes, but he didn’t have to protect someone while he was fighting this time. That aided him both mentally and physically.

“Is that so? I’m not going to stop trying, though.”

“Suit yourself. This’ll end the same way no matter what: with me devouring you.”

“Oh my. Are you going to eat me up? Himawari-neesan would be jealous if she heard that,” Jishibari joked without easing up on her fierce attacks.

She would attack, and he would block. This exchange continued for a while, with the two of them at a stalemate.

“You know, you’re starting to be a real pain!” she groaned.

Even as Jinya parried the lethal attacks, he continued to look for openings. He couldn’t go on the offensive yet even though he’d assumed his demon form. Jishibari’s ability was simply too threatening. He could bear mere pain, but he had no way of fighting back if he were tied up and restrained. That was why he allowed the battle to remain in a deadlock. But it was only a matter of time before one of them made a mistake.

Likely thinking the same thing, Jishibari spoke up. “Hey, Uncle?”

“What?”

Despite being in the middle of a fight, the two spoke almost indifferently.

“Don’t you think this is starting to get boring?”

“Funny you should say that; I was just about to say something myself.”

“Perfect. In that case…” She brought all her chains back to her side.

He lowered his stance, gripping his sword so hard he could hear his left hand creak.

“Shall we wrap this up?”

“Sounds good.” He bolted into action.

Jishibari had stopped her assault in order to invite Jinya closer. Fighting at long range only allowed him to parry her chains, so instead she would bring him as close as possible and aim for the small opening that formed when he made his attack, even if that meant being hurt in the process.

Meanwhile, Jinya refrained from using *Superhuman Strength*. It had power, but it would be useless against Jishibari because she had too many moves at her disposal. He would challenge her head on with nothing but his demon physique and sword technique, overcoming whatever strategy she used.

He stepped closer, his bloodlust cascading against hers. Without slowing down, he prepared to thrust at her throat with all his demon strength.

That was exactly what she had been waiting for. The moment he drew his right arm back, she attacked with all four of her chains, which were faster than his thrust at this range. They came at him like deadly, fanged snakes.

But Jinya had read that far. While his technique fell short of the skill Okada Kiichi had once shown, he could still emulate him. He fluidly changed his thrust into a swipe. It was a crude maneuver, but enough to surprise Jishibari.

Jinya didn't stop moving. He brushed aside the four chains in front of him, leaving her defenseless. From here, slamming his fist into her pretty face would be enough to send her flying, even without *Superhuman Strength*.

He drew nearer, just close enough for his fist to reach her. He was certain he'd win.

"Checkmate." Jishibari smiled victoriously.

In that very instant, the two chains sealing Jinya's powers came undone and took their physical form, immediately aiming for his heart and head respectively. She had aimed for the very moment he prepared his finishing strike. The four chains had only been decoys.

It was too late for Jinya to dodge. The chains cut through the air and landed squarely on their targets.

"Not yet."

With a dull clink, the metal chains bounced ineffectively off him.

Indomitable. The chains were no different than a passing breeze against his unyielding body.

He hadn't read her moves this far ahead or anything. He'd simply sensed something was off the moment he saw her grin, then immediately activated his ability. His decision had been sheer intuition, but it panned out well regardless. He couldn't deploy the ability as fast as Tsuchiura could, though. Blood trickled down from where the chains struck, as he had been a moment too slow to defend himself. He'd survived, but only narrowly.

The two demons froze stiff, both their trump cards expended. Jinya still hadn't released *Indomitable*, but he couldn't move as long as it was in use. Realizing it would all be over if he were bound by chains like this, he quickly tried to release his ability.

With her six chains knocked aside, it would take a moment before Jishibari could bring them back. The first to move would be the victor. Unfortunately, before he could release *Indomitable*, the chains returned to her side.

"…Damn." Jinya grimaced, feeling genuine panic. He still hadn't budged, and now he had no moves left to make.

Jishibari was already readying her chains. He doubted he could defend himself against them all.

"Finally. It's over." She grinned in anticipation of her victory, pointed with her left hand, and sent the chains flying at Jinya.

A strike found its mark.

"Indeed. It's over…for you."

From behind, a sword struck through Jishibari's heart.

"…Huh?" She looked down at her wound with bewildered eyes and disbelief on her face. She didn't seem to understand what had happened, nor how victory could slip her grasp here. Neither did Jinya, for that matter. He also stared in astonishment at what he saw. Jishibari groaned out, "You…can still… move?"

By no means should Kaneomi be alive. Her heart was pierced, her spine was

shattered, and her limbs were crushed. And yet, there she stood—bleeding from her wounds but sword still firmly in hand as it pierced Jishibari.

“All four of the Yatonomori Kaneomi blades are demonic swords with their own power. The power of this one is *Spirit*. It allows me to puppet a body and move it by force, even if its bones have been broken or its tendons have been cut…”

Jishibari’s face warped with irritation. She swung her arms, trying to get the sword out of her body despite the wound’s fatal nature. Jinya wasn’t about to give her any chances, though. With his grotesque left arm, he grabbed her by the neck and squeezed hard enough that her bones creaked. Her red eyes filled with fear.

“Kaneomi, are you all right?” he asked.

“Just fine, as you can see.”

She didn’t *look* fine, but if she said she was, then that was that. Jishibari’s fate was more important, so he dropped the issue.

“I see. So, what do you want to do with her?” he asked. This dispute was between Kaneomi and Jishibari; Jinya was an outsider to it. What was more, the one to deal the fatal blow had been Kaneomi, not him. He was prepared to go along with whatever she wanted.

“Do as you please.” Kaneomi cast her gaze down, her voice emotionless. Though she was moments from avenging her master, she showed no anger or hatred. Instead she seemed resigned, as though nothing mattered anymore.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I thought capturing Jishibari would somehow let me retrieve Kazusa-sama’s soul, but now I know I was only deluding myself.” Looking down, she put a hand over her pierced heart and traced a finger along the wound. She seemed sentimental, but only for a moment. “I’ve come to accept reality. Please, finish this by your own hand.”

She lifted her face. Now there was certainty in her eyes. Jinya had no way of knowing what thoughts were going through her mind, but her eyes held no doubt, and her soft smile was beautiful. He wasn't so boorish that he'd sully her determination with questions. Without a word, he nodded, then turned his attention back to Jishibari.

"Jishibari…answer me." He eased his left hand's grip on her. Her legs and arms hung loosely, and her eyes now lacked spirit. A white vapor was already rising from her. She would die on her own even if he didn't finish her off, and yet he was still trying to force her to speak. Even if she did hunt humans, this was cruel. Still, he would do it. "What is Magatsume trying to do?" he asked.

"…How should I know…?"

He was willing to dirty his hands if it meant he could get information about Magatsume. He had lived most of his life driven by hate, and it was too late for him to hesitate now.

"You know nothing?"

"That's right… And I don't care to know either. She's trying to get something done, and that's reason enough for me to help her. I was once a part of her, after all. I doubt Magatsume-sama cares what happens to us, though."

Jinya's inability to hide his hatred made Jishibari stiffen, even though she understood it wasn't directed at her. However, there was no fear on her face; it was something more like resignation, or perhaps self-deprecation. Having understood her fate, she dropped all pretense and confessed her true thoughts with surprising honesty.

"All of Magatsume-sama's children are discarded parts of her heart, but she didn't create us with her own goals in mind. We came to be because we *weren't* needed for her aims. She uses us only because we just happen to be useful. She takes care of us, but I'm sure we mean nothing to her. We're unnecessary to her."

Perhaps that was why she referred to Magatsume as "Magatsume-sama"

instead of “Mother.” She’d developed an inferiority complex from the knowledge that she wasn’t important to her.

Jinya frowned at this partial glimpse of the girl’s sadness. He didn’t feel sympathy for the human-hunting demon, but he had a child of his own, so her troubles struck a chord. “I see. Sorry to pry.”

She answered with a weak, tired smile. It was a smile like the ones his daughter made when he left her alone at home to worry about his safety. This all would’ve been easier to do if Jishibari had remained an enemy in his eyes.

“It’s fine. It’s what I get for losing,” she said.

“I see. I’ll be devouring your power now.” Though he was a little hesitant, he had no reason to let this opportunity go. He put some strength into his left arm, making it pulse like a heart. With the grotesque arm he’d received from a demon that attacked Kadono village long ago, he would consume Jishibari’s power, her memories, her emotions, her entire self.

“Agh, aaaaaah…”

He pretended not to hear her anguished groan as her very existence flowed into him from his left arm. But something was different from usual. Her memories and emotions were incomprehensible, as if they were cast in a veil of mist. None of her heart transmitted to him, but her consciousness slowly faded nonetheless.

“Farewell then, Jishibari.”

He gave her some brief parting words, the best apology he could manage. For an instant, he thought he saw her crack a sad smile.

Then, just like that, with no death cries or bitter words to leave behind, she faded away.

Rii-rii-rii, rii-rii-rii.

The surroundings went quiet again, the void filled only by the sound of insects. And so, the night parade met its end in the span of just a few hours.

“Ah, thank goodness. I’ve managed to avenge Kazusa-sama…” Kaneomi murmured emotionally. The current era did not approve of the sword or vengeance, but those two things were all she had. There was no changing or returning to the past. She had failed to protect her master, and there was no way for her to undo that. But after a long, grueling journey, she could finally cut away what bound her to the past. She was able to see her will through, and that was enough for her. She sighed softly, full of relief, then reached her limit. Having fulfilled her duty, she collapsed like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“Kaneomi?” Jinya approached her calmly, neither surprised nor flustered. To some extent, he’d seen this coming. He lifted her slender and much too light body up. Despite her injuries, she still held tight to her sword. She lived true as a blade, from beginning to end.

“Thank you…Kadono-sama…” Her pupils wandered emptily. She was beyond help, but then again, it was strange she was still alive at all. Her body was mangled beyond repair, but her heart was full. For her, there was no more vengeance to be wrought, no more regrets to be had…and no more reason to defy the natural order and cling to life. Hence, it only made sense that she would die.

“Hang on, I’ll go fetch help,” Jinya said.

“Don’t. It’s too late for me. I could only force myself this far because of my power; this body is long finished.”

Spirit, the power to control a body like a puppet. That was what allowed her to move beyond her natural abilities, but there was only so much it could do. The body in Jinya’s arms was cold. He felt no pulse from it.

In fact, he had known the truth, but he’d simply pretended not to. Kaneomi wasn’t dying here. *Her life came to an end long ago*. And yet she seemed at peace now, like an elder passing away at the end of a long, fulfilling life. He

ground his teeth strongly as he filled with regret. Once again, he had failed to protect someone. She had come to him for help, even enduring the shame that came from it, but he couldn't manage a thing for her.

"Ha ha. Please don't make that kind of face. It was always going to end like this, but I have no regrets now because I managed to fulfill my purpose. I guess I will miss eating your soba, though."

"I'll make you as much soba as you want."

"How nice. I would have loved to get a deal like that a little earlier, though." She weakly laughed, making him grimace. "…I never thought you'd be so reluctant to see me go."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't save you…"

"Again, please don't make that face. You lent me your aid, even though I never told you anything about myself. That alone is enough. A shameful blade was able to redeem itself thanks to you."

That was why she could accept such an end.

With what was likely the last of her strength, she slowly raised a hand and brushed his cheek. "I'm sure Kazusa-sama's soul must rest inside you now. Maybe that means I should call you my new master?"

Her joke made his chest feel tight.

"Sure. I don't mind. So just…"

Don't die. He wanted to say it, but he couldn't.

"Ha ha, I see. Yes…perhaps…serving as your blade…would not be…so bad."

From his arms, she made one last teasing smile. Then her hand fell, and she lay motionless.

“HERE, JINYA.”

After getting a little sleep to refresh themselves, Somegorou and Jinya met at Demon Soba at the break of dawn. The restaurant wasn’t open yet. Still exhausted, Jinya wondered if he should keep it closed for the day.

“What’s this?”

“Your share. I didn’t think of mentioning it earlier, but I actually got quite a lot of requests to do something about that night parade. Made a decent killing, so I figured we’d split it down the middle.” Somegorou had apparently gone around collecting money after his brief rest.

Jinya accepted the bag of coins and stowed it away in the back of the restaurant, then returned and sat across from Somegorou. Only the two of them were present. The slender woman with the unusual getup had not made it back. Jinya gazed absently at Yatonomori Kaneomi, placed to the side.

“That Magatsume’s up to something. But what does ‘making a heart’ mean?” Somegorou murmured as he sipped tea.

Suzune had toyed with corpses for the purpose of creating something, but not even Jinya knew what that something could be.

The mere thought of her stirred hatred in him like thick sludge again. He hated the feeling. It reminded him of his inability to change, even after all these decades had passed.

“Hey, this is a bit late, but wasn’t Magatsume the blonde-haired demon behind Snow’s Memory?” Somegorou asked.

“Yeah. She’s supposed to become a Demon God and appear in Kadono in more than a hundred years’ time, bringing ruin to the world of man.”

“Oh, well then. Kadono’s your hometown, ain’t it?” Somegorou’s face was a cross between a smile and exasperation. From his exchange with Himawari, he knew Magatsume was Jinya’s sister. Perhaps he had some thoughts about how Jinya avoided bringing that up. “Well, I won’t ask you for the details, but just

know that I'll be there to help you out when the time comes."

Jinya was grateful for the kind words, but humans did not live as long as demons. When the time came, Somegorou would long be…

Jinya brushed aside the thought and simply said, "Thank you." He knew there was no way the man could keep his word, but he didn't want to spurn his kindness.

The mood became slightly heavier. They found themselves out of things to say, and the only sound became the sipping of tea. Time passed at a crawl.

The long silence was broken by a teasing voice. *"You know, I was surprised to learn you could be so sappy, Kadono-sama."* It was the familiar voice of a certain woman, even though the two men were the only ones in the restaurant.

With a sour expression, Jinya shot a glare at Yatonomori Kaneomi. "You be quiet."

Seeming amused by Jinya's surly look, Somegorou leaned forward. "Oh? Did something funny happen?"

"I'm not so sure I'd call it funny, but Kadono-sama did promise to make me as much soba as I wanted."

It should be said that promising to make someone food for the rest of their life was sometimes used as a confession of love, typically from a woman to a man.

"Oh my, oh my… So who fell for whom first?" Somegorou feigned surprise and looked at Jinya. His wide grin made it clear he was teasing. He irritated Jinya, but not as much as the woman's voice did. Somegorou didn't seem the slightest bit surprised to hear her.

"Ah, so he meant it that way, did he?" The sword on the table, Yatonomori Kaneomi, spoke once more through inexplicable means.

"I said be quiet," Jinya groaned. His sour mood came from a place of embarrassment, not anger. After the battle with Jishibari, he'd said a number of

careless things to Kaneomi. He meant it all, of course, but having it brought up still embarrassed him.

Somegorou broke into non-stop laughter at Jinya's state.

"Somegorou, you knew from the start, didn't you?" Jinya said.

"Hm? Oh, 'course I did. I mean, I *did* tell you Kaneomi was a sword, didn't I?"

Somegorou did say something along those lines, but Jinya hadn't even begun to think he might mean it literally.

Yatonomori Kaneomi spoke up, lacking a mouth but able to talk by vibrating the air. *"I do believe I told you myself that I was the blade."*

She *had* said that a number of times: "This blade is who I am" and "this sword is my soul." Jinya had assumed she was just being metaphorical, however.

"Yes, yes, I get it," he said. Only after it was all over did he understand what Kaneomi really was.

Kaneomi—that was to say, the demonic sword Yatonomori Kaneomi—was Kazusa's sword. Not in some metaphorical sense, but literally. Kaneomi was the blade used by whoever was the Nagumo of the Demonic Sword, passed down to Kazusa from her father. When Kaneomi said she taught Kazusa the sword, she really meant she taught her the proper way to use herself. Her master wasn't her master at all, but her wielder. The Kaneomi Jinya had known up until then was just the psyche of Yatonomori Kaneomi.

Kaneomi served Kazusa as her sword, spending years with her until they encountered Jishibari, who stole Kazusa's soul. This, too, was true in the literal sense. Jishibari likely drew upon her demon ability to bind Kazusa's soul and keep it within herself. A body without a soul could not move on its own, so Kaneomi used her power to make it move.

Spirit, Kaneomi's ability, was the power to control a body like a puppet. Even if her bones were broken or her tendons were cut, she could move herself by force. It might be more appropriate to say Kaneomi was the ability *Spirit* itself.

The spirit of the blade—hence, *Spirit*.

That was what caused Jishibari and Kaneomi to look like mirror images of one another. Jishibari had taken Kazusa's soul, and Kaneomi controlled Kazusa's body.

"Come to think of it, you hinted about this whole thing around the time we first met," Jinya said.

"With the story of Twin Shizuka?"

"Yeah."

"Let me ask you once more, then. Why do you think the Vegetable Picker could continue her dance?"

In the story, the Vegetable Picker was possessed by the spirit of Shizuka Gozen. Midway through her dance, Shizuka Gozen manifested, but the Vegetable Picker continued to dance. What allowed her to keep dancing? Based on what he knew now, Jinya had an answer: "Obviously, a third party was controlling her."

If a body had no soul, then it had to move through other means. He'd treated the story as nothing but idle chatter back then, but now he realized Kaneomi was alluding to her identity, as circuitous as it may have been.

"Correct." She sounded pleased. He imagined her nodding proudly at him.

He had a faint idea why Magatsume was so interested in Kaneomi. If she was trying to create a heart, then a sword with a heart of its own would be very intriguing to her.

"Gotta say, though, I'm surprised yer body didn't rot when you were dead," Somegorou said.

"That's likely because of Jishibari's power."

Having your soul stolen wasn't quite the same as being killed. Hence, Kazusa was in a half-dead, half-alive state. Unaging because she was dead, but undecaying because she was alive as well. After their recent fight, however,

Kazusa's body had unmistakably become a corpse.

That was probably why Kaneomi left Jishibari's fate to Jinya. Now that Kazusa's body was destroyed, retrieving her soul became meaningless. Or maybe Kaneomi never really believed Kazusa's soul could be retrieved but told herself otherwise because it was all she could do to keep herself going.

"Is something the matter?"

"No."

He didn't voice his thoughts. Only Kaneomi knew the truth, and he didn't want to pry. He had no interest in reopening her wounds.

"Welp, the whole night parade incident is over, Kaneomi got her revenge, and Jinya found himself a wife. I'm happy for you two."

"You be quiet. For real." Jinya glared at Somegorou, who was still teasing.

Unfazed, Somegorou shrugged off Jinya's glare with a smile. He really was quite the old man. "Aw, don't say that. Huh?"

He squinted off at something he'd noticed in the distance. Jinya followed his gaze to see Nomari standing in the back of the restaurant.

"Nomari?" Jinya said.

She stared at him with a depressed look on her face. Something was off. He stood up and walked closer to her, calling her name once more, but she didn't respond. After a silence, she spoke up in a faint whisper. "I told you I didn't want a mother, and you said you were fine with that…"

She seemed to be misunderstanding what was going on, having walked in on them in the middle of the conversation. Jinya tried to explain himself, but a sharp glare from her shut him up.

"Liar."

Her words cut him like a knife. She turned around and left to return to the back room. The light mood had vanished; the atmosphere was now tense.

“Welp. Looks like all our problems are solved ’cept Jinya’s biggest one,” Somegorou said, scratching his cheek.

Jinya couldn’t do anything but stand there in a daze.

“Um… Sorry…?” Kaneomi made a confused apology, not fully grasping the situation.

Jinya didn’t blame her. He fought to hide his inner turmoil and made his face as calm as he could. “It’s fine,” he said. He couldn’t hide the somberness in his voice, though. Being hated by one’s own daughter was rough.

“Girls are complicated. Don’t let it get to ya.”

“Is that something a bachelor like you should be saying, Akitsu-sama?”

“Oh, now ya said it. Let’s take this outside.”

Jinya ignored the two and sighed.

The story of a sword that failed to protect what it held dear had somehow ended on a happy note. Kaneomi may have lost her body, but she was still here with them. Surely that was something to be delighted about.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I’m just feeling a bit tired.”

“That’s not good. As your ‘wife,’ I’m worried.”

She dared to joke about that despite the trouble it had already caused. She sounded like she was enjoying herself, though, so he didn’t reproach her. But he did let out another sigh.

And just like that, Jishibari and Kaneomi’s story reached its end. Nagumo Kazusa was avenged, and Kaneomi had a weight taken off her shoulders. Magatsume’s goals remained a mystery, and things were still rocky between Jinya and Nomari. Jinya had his work cut out for him. It could be said things had settled down for the time being.

After all its twists and turns, there was really only one phrase this episode

should end with.

“Here’s to a long-lasting relationship, ‘Husband.’”

To put it simply, Kaneomi was a sword.

A Tale of a Mother Goddess and Manju

1

IT WAS MARCH in year eleven of the Meiji era (1878 AD).

Mihashiya was a confectionery store located on Sanjyou Street in Kyoto. It had little history to speak of, having only been established in year four of the Meiji era. Its owner, Mihashi Toyoshige, didn't have much of a knack for business—or rather, he severely lacked the drive to thrive. That meant the place had very few customers even after years of operation. Even so, things did pick up every year when cherry blossom season rolled around.

"Jeez… This season always does a number on me." Toyoshige stretched his back and sighed as he complained about business picking up. His sweets had sold well for the day because so many people were going on picnics to admire the cherry blossoms. The sun was beginning to set, meaning it was about time to close up.

The busy day left him bone tired. Most business owners would probably prefer this kind of success every day, but Toyoshige was honestly happy to just earn enough for a roof over his head and some food. He would much rather work a moderate amount and take it easy instead of putting his nose to the grindstone.

He was actually rather skilled at making sweets; the store just wasn't well known because he didn't market himself much. They had some regular customers—enough to remain afloat and then some—so he didn't mind things remaining the way they were. But of course, his wife would scold him if he ever told her that, so his complacent mindset was all hush-hush where she was concerned.

"All right, better get cleanin'." He planned to quickly close up shop, then enjoy some dinner and a stiff drink. His wife was stern, but he didn't dislike her or anything. They were a strong couple, in fact. Her cooking was simply

delicious, so he couldn't wait to pair it with some liquor. If he recalled correctly, today she'd prepared a rapeseed flower dish with spicy mustard for him to eat after dinner with his drink. The anticipation put him in a good mood, so he jovially hummed a tune while he took down the store's entrance curtains. However, a cold breeze made him shiver as he did so. March nights were still quite chilly. Thinking he would much rather not catch a cold, he hurried along, but then came to a halt when he felt a gaze on him. There was a young boy standing by his side whom he hadn't noticed approaching. The boy, whose skin was oddly pale, appeared to be around ten years old or so. He stared at Toyoshige.

"Need somethin'?" The sun would set soon. Toyoshige scanned the area but didn't see anyone who looked like the boy's parent. A lost child, perhaps. Toyoshige stooped down to the boy's eye level. He was expressionless and not all that responsive. They looked at one another in silence for a while, and Toyoshige was wondering what to do when the boy suddenly opened his mouth to speak.

"Manju. Sell me manju."

"Oh, you on an errand, then? Can you pay?"

The boy held out several small coins. A single manju sold for five rin,[4] so he had enough to buy three.

"That'll do. You going to eat 'em all yourself, kid?"

"No. With Mommy."

"Is that right? Wait here a second." Toyoshige went inside and wrapped up five manju. They were all unsold leftovers from that day, which meant he could afford to toss in a couple for free. His wife was soft on kids, so she'd probably have made him give even more if she were there.

"That'll be one sen[5] and five rin. I tossed in some freebies for you too."

"Here." The boy held out all his coins, probably because he couldn't count

money. Toyoshige took the exact amount, then handed the manju over to the boy, who bowed and left. His facial expression had stayed the same throughout the entire exchange.

Toyoshige thought the boy was a bit quiet and strange, but he hoped he and his mother would enjoy their manju, freebies and all. He went back inside in a good mood…one that would not last.

***

Three days passed.

"Sorry, Kadono-san? Are you there?"

"Mihashi-san?"

Toyoshige visited Demon Soba right as it was closing. The two met each other frequently because they cleaned in front of their shops around the same time in the morning, but it was unusual for Jinya to see him visit the soba restaurant. The two were far from strangers now, having even shared drinks a few times. However, Toyoshige did not seem to be his usual laid-back, grumbling self. He looked bewildered for once.

"Is something the matter?" Jinya asked.

"Oh, no. Er, well… There's something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Okay…"

The man was oddly hesitant to speak. He hemmed and hawed for a good while before finally working up the courage to say, "Kadono-san… I heard a rumor that ya handle incidents of a *supernatural* nature. D'ya really?"

He'd apparently come because he heard the rumor that Jinya was a swordmaster who slew demons in a single strike. The rumor sounded like a cock-and-bull story, of course, so he was hesitant to even bring it up. But he *did* bring it up, which meant he was just that desperate for help.

Jinya nodded without a word. Hesitantly, Toyoshige began to explain his problem.

“A ghost child?” Jinya repeated back.

“That’s right. He visits my shop every night.”

Apparently, there was a strange young boy who came to Mihashiya to buy manju. He always appeared around closing time and didn’t speak much or show any expression. The boy paid, so that wasn’t a problem. In fact, Toyoshige thought nothing of him at first.

It was his wife who thought their little customer was suspicious—or rather, thought the boy’s *mother* was suspicious. The boy bought manju for his mother, but this mother never once came herself. The boy didn’t smile and had injuries on his body here and there. Hence, Toyoshige’s wife suspected his mother might be abusing him.

“She sure sounds worried,” Jinya said.

“Ah well… She can’t have kids because of a fever she caught a long while back. That’s probably why she’s a bit soft when it comes to ’em. Not that I ain’t as well, I s’pose.”

Toyoshige didn’t want to see his wife so worried, and was frankly quite curious himself, so he watched the boy go as he left the previous night—but the boy simply *vanished*. Without turning a corner, getting lost in a crowd, or even walking very far. Like smoke, he vanished from Toyoshige’s sight.

“I know I didn’t just see things wrong. The kid was just gone. But he came back today to buy manju again, so I watched him go and, *poof*, gone again once more.” Toyoshige sounded more bewildered than frightened.

From what Jinya heard, there didn’t seem to be any harm done. It wasn’t like the story ended with the money later turning into leaves or anything—a clichéd twist in tales of tanuki spirits. The boy simply bought manju, then vanished after he left. That was all. Still, seeing something so clearly supernatural had Toyoshige flustered.

“’Course, I ain’t asking you to help out for free, Kadono-san. I can’t promise a

lot, but I can pay."

"I won't charge just for a little investigation. You can pay me later, *if* something comes of all this."

"Really? That'd be a big favor!"

Truth be told, receiving money was just an extra bonus to Jinya. His real interest was always in the supernatural incident itself.

A ghost child was nothing spectacular, but it was still a supernatural phenomenon. At the very least, it was worth looking into. Jinya didn't expect much in the way of reward, but that was fine. Lending a hand was simply part of being a good neighbor.

He never expected he'd get stuck with a rather unfriendly partner, though.

***

Utsugi Heikichi lost both his parents at a young age. He was just past eight then, if he could trust his memory. He and his parents had been walking at night while a beautiful moon adorned the sky. They were just unlucky, really.

All Heikichi remembered was the redness. A demon suddenly attacked them, and his mind and sight went bright crimson. His happy life was smashed to pieces, just as easily as his parents' heads were.

Hey, kid. Think ya can make it over here? The one who took him in afterward was a man called Akitsu Somegorou the Third.

Heikichi ran for his life, afraid of the demon that had killed his parents, but there was no way the short legs of a child could outrun a demon.

Oh, so I'm going to die, he thought, moments away from meeting a cruel end. But it never came.

Somegorou gallantly appeared before him and slew the demon in a single strike.

Even now, Heikichi remembered the moment. There were so many things he

could have said then: *Why couldn't you have come sooner? Why couldn't you have saved my parents as well?* But such misdirected complaints did not even occur to him—Akitsu Somegorou was just that incredible.

Heikichi came to admire those who hunted demons. He became Somegorou's disciple and continued to respect him. But at the same time, he loathed the demons that had trampled his happiness.

He detested them. He saw their very existence as harmful. He believed they had no worth to the world and that it was always just a matter of time before they hurt someone. Through his own lived experience, Heikichi came to despise spirits of all kinds.

"One tempura soba, ready."

…And yet, he was now eating soba made by a demon.

Heikichi frequently visited Demon Soba, a restaurant run by a demon named Kadono Jinya. Jinya was apparently an old friend of his master. He pretended to be human and ran a soba restaurant, undertaking work related to the supernatural on the side.

Jinya paradoxically killed demons, despite being a member of that loathsome race himself. He even knew Heikichi hated demons but didn't treat him any differently. But, worst of all, Heikichi was getting somewhat used to talking to Jinya, having visited the restaurant with his master many times ever since he was young. Heikichi was appalled to think he could be so tolerant of a demon.

"Heikichi-san, here's some more tea."

"Huh? Oh, s-sorry for the trouble, Nomari-san!" Heikichi grinned broadly. The main reason why he came to this demon-run restaurant was because a certain somebody worked here. Nomari—who wore a pink ribbon that suited her well—was the poster girl of Demon Soba. She was also Heikichi's first love, and somehow the adoptive daughter of a loathsome demon.

"I feel like I've seen your face around here a lot lately," she said.

“Aha ha, well, neither my master nor I can cook, so, y’know…” He managed to speak normally to her but quickly started worrying whether his voice sounded a little squeaky. The two were relatively close, having known one another since they were young. He’d had feelings for her practically forever, but because he couldn’t take that last step, the two had merely remained good friends. He’d begun coming more frequently in hopes that their relationship might change, but even now, as a young man aged seventeen, he still got nervous around her.

“How have things been lately?” he asked.

“Well… Not great, to be honest.”

“I-I see…”

A while back, she’d confided in him that she hadn’t been able to hold a proper conversation with her father for a while. Things apparently still hadn’t improved, and a strange distance had formed between the once-close father and daughter.

“All right, how about I go have a word or two with him?” he suggested.

“Just stop.”

“Huh? But—”

“Seriously, stop. I’m happy you’re worried about me, but I’ll get mad for real if you butt in here. This is…my problem. My father hasn’t done anything wrong,” she said with a weak smile.

She refused more strongly than he’d expected, but she still sounded unsure of herself. He wanted to say something supportive, but no tasteful words came to mind.

“Besides,” she continued, “he apparently got another one of those jobs of his, so I don’t want to bother him right now. Something about a ghost. He said he’ll be leaving tomorrow evening to handle it.”

“O-oh, I see. Um…” She seemed so terribly dejected saying all that, but Heikichi didn’t know how to comfort her. He stumbled over his words until

eventually a customer called for her and she had to leave.

“Sorry, Heikichi-san, but I have to go,” she said with a cheerful smile.

How pathetic. He couldn’t even comfort the woman he liked. Disappointed in himself, he made a long sigh, then glanced at Jinya working away out of the corner of his eye. He called out, “Hey.”

“Can I help you?”

“Er, well…” Heikichi checked his surroundings. “I heard your next job is something involving a ghost?” Unable to ask what he really wanted, he instead defaulted to talking about what Nomari had just brought up. He was no stranger to such topics as an artifact spirit user under Akitsu Somegorou the Third’s tutelage, so Jinya had no reason to hide anything from him. He couldn’t share the finer details like the identity of his client, but the gist of things should be fine.

“That’s right. Apparently, one has been showing up every night,” Jinya answered.

“Sounds fairly tame. At least it’s not running its own restaurant.”

“I suppose.”

Jinya didn’t comment on the snide remark. Even now, Heikichi still hated demons simply for being demons. Jinya mystified him, though. He was calm, a close friend of his master, a spirit hunter, and a father to a human.

“…Say, don’t you ever…” *Think about killing humans?* Heikichi wanted to ask, but his voice trailed off. That, at the very least, was not something to ask here in the restaurant. So instead, he idly watched Jinya work. Despite being a demon, the man worked hard. Heikichi knew he was strong—his master said himself that he didn’t know which of the two would come out on top in a fight—and yet he still took this banal labor seriously. It was strange to think that even such a diligent man could have a rocky relationship with his daughter.

Nomari would only get angry at Heikichi if he tried to butt into their problems.

Things may have been strained between them, but she still didn't hate her father. And yet, things still *were* strained…

Being a young, inexperienced, seventeen-year-old man, Heikichi saw no way he could help the two. The only thing he could do was start slurping his now-soggy noodles.

***

"I'm on my way out, Nomari."

"All right. I'll be here at home."

"Sorry for always leaving you alone like this."

"I-It's… Whatever. I'll be fine."

The day after he accepted the job request from Mihashi Toyoshige, Jinya closed up the restaurant early. The ghost child was supposed to appear around the time Mihashiya closed, which was soon. Nomari saw Jinya off, but their conversation was strained. Still, he knew from the worry in her eyes that she cared about him, and that was enough.

"Raising a daughter is tough, eh, Husband?" The moment Nomari left, one of the swords on Jinya's hip spoke to him. It was Yatonomori Kaneomi, a demonic blade forged together with demon blood. For some inexplicable reason, she was proclaiming herself to be his wife.

"It's tough, but who do you think you're calling 'Husband'?"

"Pardon? Were you not the one who courted me?"

"You know I didn't mean what I said like that."

No matter how many times he insisted, Kaneomi wouldn't change the way she addressed him, whether it was in jest or not. He understood she was coming from a place of gratitude, though, so he gave in and allowed it, hoping she would tire of it eventually.

"Hm. I guess I shouldn't take you with me, huh?"

“Indeed, and what a shame that is. Your loyal wife shall stay home and await your return.”

Since the Sword Abolishment Edict was in effect, it would be risky to wear swords on his visit to Mihashiya. Luckily, this case didn’t seem particularly dangerous, so he likely wouldn’t need a weapon at all. He removed the two swords from his hip and placed them in his room, then left the restaurant.

Waiting outside was a familiar face: Utsugi Heikichi, Somegorou’s disciple. He stood there with an uncomfortable expression.

“Utsugi? Did you need something?” Jinya asked.

“O-oh, um, I guess. Yeah.”

Jinya paid the young man’s evasive phrasing no mind. He was used to that kind of thing from him, after all. Heikichi loathed demons and wasn’t afraid to let people know it. He’d been hostile to Jinya ever since he was young, although he’d mellowed out enough that the two could at least talk a bit. It was clear that his hatred still remained, though. He didn’t accept Jinya, a demon who hid among humans.

Jinya took the young man’s hatred in stride, thinking nothing in particular of Heikichi himself. Normally he’d put up with Heikichi’s bitterness and talk with him, but he had other things to focus on today. “I’m sorry, but I’ve already closed up the restaurant for the day. I have business to attend to, so please come again tomorrow.” A job was a job, no matter how small. Jinya wasn’t about to skimp on his work.

Awkwardly, Heikichi said, “Ah, right, um… I’m actually here about that business of yours…”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

Heikichi hemmed and hawed, only answering after considerable hesitation. Eventually, he sulkily said, “Right, so… D’ya mind if I tag along with ya?”

2

THERE HAD BEEN two turning points in Heikichi's life. The first was meeting Akitsu Somegorou, and the second was meeting Nomari. If he recalled correctly, she had been the one to approach and talk to him first. He didn't quite remember how he responded, but he faintly recalled his master complimenting the young girl for her politeness. Heikichi's own response was probably less praiseworthy.

"Nice to meet you, um…"

"…It's Heikichi. Utsugi Heikichi."

"Nice to meet you, Heikichi-san."

He remembered thinking she was cute at first, then feeling irked. She was being raised by a demon. There was no way she could be normal.

"Jinya, I'll have me a kitsune soba."

"Give me one too."

Somegorou often ate here because he liked the kitsune soba. Heikichi often got dragged along, so he naturally saw more and more of Nomari.

"Hello, Akitsu-san, Heikichi-san."

"Oh, heya, Nomari-chan."

"…Hello."

She was attending elementary school back then, so she was only in the restaurant on her days off and hadn't started helping out much yet. Even so, Heikichi could vividly recall how she would sweetly call out to her father at every opportunity. She used to be such a daddy's girl.

The soba didn't taste bad, but knowing it was made by a demon didn't sit right with Heikichi. His gaze wandered as he ate, and he would often have nothing to look at but her. He hated demons, so he naturally was not fond of her at first.

Demons killed humans, and yet the demon running the restaurant clearly treasured his daughter and vice versa. That realization turned the world Heikichi knew on its head. Their relationship was the exact opposite of the way he thought things should be between humans and demons, so he unconsciously began to pay more attention to her.

His hatred of demons remained to this day, but now he knew just how much the demon at the restaurant loved his daughter and how much the daughter loved her father back. And because Heikichi watched her so much, he knew just how pure and sweet a girl she could be.

"What's wrong, Heikichi-san?"

She even showed kindness to a cheeky brat like him. Before he even knew it, she had melted the walls of his heart.

Those events were what led him to follow Jinya now.

"Oh, if it isn't Kadono-san! Who's your friend?" A cheerful woman greeted the two after they passed under Mihashiya's entrance curtains. She was Saku, Toyoshige's wife. Her headstrong personality made her the polar opposite of her easygoing husband. She always greeted customers energetically. Despite being so different from her husband, she had a surprising affinity with him. She kept Toyoshige on a tight leash, yes, but the two were smitten with one another.

"Good evening, Saku-san," Jinya said. "This is…a regular of mine, I suppose."

"Oh my, how lucky for you. I wish we had as many regulars as you did," she joked with a bright smile.

"I'm sure you will eventually."

Heikichi watched the two, feeling bewildered to see a demon getting along with his neighbor like it was perfectly normal.

When Heikichi said he wanted to tag along and investigate the ghost with Jinya, Jinya showed some hesitation but did not refuse, which was strange in

itself. Considering Heikichi's past treatment of him, Jinya had every right to shoot him down.

"Could you package up four…no, five manju for me?" Jinya asked.

"But of course! That'll be two sen."

"Isn't that five rin short?"

"I'm giving you one as a freebie. In exchange, come bring Nomari-chan over again one of these days."

"I see. Thank you."

"Treat her well, you hear? Good little girls like her are hard to come by."

"Yes, indeed. I will."

Saku seemed awfully fond of the father-daughter pair. And from the way he took the teasing in stride, Jinya apparently liked his neighbors back.

"Psst, hey. Why are you buying manju?" Heikichi whispered. They were heading out to investigate, and yet here Jinya was, purchasing food. He didn't have his swords with him either. Confused, he added, "And where're your swords, anyway?"

"I doubt I'll need them this time. The manju should be enough."

How so? Heikichi wondered. But before he could ask further, Toyoshige appeared from deeper inside the shop. It was almost dusk, about time for the place to close.

"Oh, Kadono-san, you came."

"As promised."

"Ha ha, thank goodness. I'll start closin' up for the day, so just hang tight."

The ghost they were investigating never entered Mihashiya, instead calling out to Toyoshige when he was closing up. Things would likely be the same today.

As instructed, Jinya and Heikichi waited vigilantly out in the street. The husband and wife started arguing once the two left. It sounded as though Toyoshige hadn't told Saku that he'd hired Jinya to investigate the ghost. Perhaps he was worried what she would think of him wasting money on such a thing.

Once their argument settled down, Toyoshige went back to closing up and eventually started taking down his entrance curtains. That was when it happened. Jinya and Heikichi were certain they had been paying attention, but a boy suddenly appeared out of nowhere and tugged at Toyoshige's clothes.

"…A ghost," Heikichi murmured.

Jinya ignored Heikichi and intently watched the exchange. There was no hostility in his gaze.

"Sell me manju," the boy said. He paid the money and received his manju. There was nothing strange at all to be seen, except perhaps the fact that the boy arrived while the shop was closing.

As he watched the child leave, Heikichi's eyes shot wide open. With the packaged manju in his arms, the boy broke into a slight trot down the street, then disappeared in the blink of an eye. Heikichi hadn't taken his eyes off him once, and yet the boy was gone. Vanished without a trace, like smoke.

"Shall we go, then?" Jinya had seen the same thing, but he didn't seem the least bit surprised. Heikichi had no idea how he would even begin to follow the disappearing ghost, but Jinya walked ahead without hesitation. There was no rush to his step, as if he were only leaving to go for a stroll.

"What? Go? Go where?"

"Go where that ghost went, of course. Somegorou told me earlier today where it might be headed," Jinya said matter-of-factly.

Heikichi opened his mouth wide in disbelief, realizing why Jinya had allowed him to come along.

“Somegorou really knows best about these kinds of things,” Jinya said.

“Wait… Don’t tell me there’s nothing left to be done?”

“If there were, I wouldn’t have let you come along in the first place. These are all we need to take care of things.” Jinya gestured to the packaged manju in his hands. The fact that he hadn’t brought a sword meant there was no danger. Everything that needed to be investigated had already been looked into, and the items needed to resolve the incident had already been gathered. In other words, Heikichi had only been permitted to come because there was absolutely no chance he would be in danger.

“…You could’ve said something sooner.”

“Sorry, I guess.”

Jinya paid little mind to Heikichi’s complaint and attitude, which only made the latter frown more. Heikichi felt as though Jinya was saying he was wrong to take issue at all.

“I really just can’t bring myself to like you,” Heikichi mumbled.

“I know that. So, what business did you have with me?”

“Huh?”

“There’s something going on, right? I’m sure you wouldn’t tag along with a demon for the fun of it.”

He had Heikichi there. He obviously had to have some kind of other motive for coming along. Heikichi didn’t really have a clear reason for what he did, though. It was mostly an impulsive decision, and so he was at a loss for a reply.

He wanted to say something to Jinya about his relationship with his daughter, something that would ease Nomari’s worries; he was curious about why Jinya was a demon who hunted other demons; he wanted to grasp what Jinya was and why he differed so much from his mental image of a demon—all these things were true, but none of them felt like they were *really it* for Heikichi. So instead, he said, “I… I don’t know. I don’t know why I tagged along.”

“Is that so?”

Heikichi thought Jinya would press him for answers, but the man just walked away, paying him no mind. Heikichi was confused. “…You’re fine with that as an answer?”

“Sure. I doubt many people can give logical reasons for why they do every single thing they do.” Jinya smiled weakly, as if he were talking about himself.

Heikichi’s confusion only deepened. This was not the kind of face a cruel, murderous demon would make.

Jinya was truly such a strange demon. Stunned, Heikichi watched the man walk ahead…and felt the tiniest bit of gratitude to him.

***

Awataguchi Gate was Kyoto’s eastern gateway. It was by far the most important of the city’s seven gateways because it connected to the Tokaido and Nakasendo highways that led to the eastern provinces of the country. Sanjyou Street was busy because it was connected to Awataguchi gate, but Jinya and Heikichi walked a path that was slightly removed from all the hustle and bustle. Unlike the gaudy Sanjyou Street, the narrow lane they ventured down was still and quiet, and the further they went, the more silent the night seemed to become.

Not that far from Awataguchi Gate, the two spotted a small figure in the alley. It was a child who gave off a peculiar vacant feeling—the ghost they were investigating.

“That’s him!” Heikichi exclaimed. The ghost quickly disappeared, however.

Without hurrying, Jinya started walking in the direction where the ghost had been. Heikichi wondered if the ghost had disappeared because he’d spoken and told himself he would keep his trap shut next time.

After walking to the spot where the ghost had been, Jinya stopped before a building and stared at it. It was a small, barren vermilion shrine that was

narrowly sandwiched between living quarters. There was a fairly long, slender stone enshrined in it.

"What's this, then?" Heikichi asked.

"A shrine dedicated to Sai-no-kami. It's gone to ruin without anyone to maintain it, but nobody wants to be the one to tear it down, so it simply remains."

Sai-no-kami was a god of paths. She prevented sinister things from entering villages and homes by blocking their entry, as was indicated by one meaning of her name: "Sai," to block or obstruct. Villages often enshrined the god at their entrances. This shrine's Sai-no-kami was a guardian of Awataguchi Gate, but the problem was that the Awata Shrine already had their own deities that fulfilled similar purposes, ones that repelled both evil and disease. Hence, Sai-no-kami and her unassuming go-shintai of a stone were moved to this corner of the town to be forgotten.

"Sai-no-kami is a god of paths, but 'Sai' can also mean 'performing one's duty,' so she was also seen as a god of marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth. I'll bet this was mainly a shrine people visited to wish for a child," Jinya said.

"O-oh, okay?" Heikichi failed to see the importance of the varied meanings of 'Sai,' but the much longer-lived Jinya did.

He looked at Heikichi, his eyes soft for some reason. "But eventually the shrine was forgotten entirely by the people. That's why Sai-no-kami's child does what he can to look after her instead. That's all this incident really is."

"Wait, by 'child' do you mean that ghost?"

"That's not a ghost; it's a type of spirit born from thoughts. It's nowhere near as frightening as its demon equivalents, though," Jinya added self-deprecatingly. "Some people want a child but have no success in bearing their own, so they turn to the gods and wish for one. After many of these small wishes were made over the years, they coalesced into the Sai-no-kami's own child."

That was why there was no need to bring a sword. The thing they were investigating posed no threat. It was just the manifestation of many mothers' wishes for a child. It lacked the strength to harm anything—it likely couldn't even *think* of harming anything. The only thing it could do, or could even want to do, was show love to its own mother.

"Then what were the manju for?"

"To eat with his mother, of course. It doesn't matter if you're human or spirit; everyone is grateful to the one who brought them into the world."

Looking closely, they saw there were manju offered to the shrine. They were the same kind as the ones the two had bought at Mihashiya. The ghost must have been buying them to offer to Sai-no-kami every night.

"From what I can tell, the spirit's power is weak. He'll eventually vanish on his own," Jinya said.

"…You think so?"

"Yeah. Either way, he's just a kid buying manju for his mother. It's no problem to leave him be."

Jinya took his packaged manju and offered them to the shrine: three for the mother and two for the child.

Heikichi felt someone watching them and looked over to see the ghost—no, Sai-no-kami's child—peering out from the shadows. He bowed thankfully to Jinya and smiled for the very first time. And then, like smoke, he was gone the next instant.

"Our business is taken care of. Let's head back," Jinya said, turning to walk away.

"Oh. Sure." Heikichi hurriedly followed him. He thought Jinya had smiled for a second, but his expression went back to normal at once. Still, looking at his back now, he thought the demon seemed somehow kinder and more fatherly.

The two walked in silence for a time. The silence was all the more oppressive

in the soundless alley, devoid of people.

“You know…” Nevertheless, it wasn’t the silence that made Heikichi talk. The words just came to him, and before he knew it, he was speaking. “I thought you’d be more violent or whatever, because you kill demons and all…” But instead, Jinya had simply offered some manju to a shrine and left. Even if the target was only just a child trying to show love to his mother, Heikichi hadn’t expected a demon like Jinya to spare him. “I figured this could only end with you killing the ghost.”

“Oftentimes, things do end that way. I’ll kill whomever I must. But really, I’d rather not kill anyone at all. I’m not strong enough to burden myself for nothing.”

The lives Jinya took were clearly a heavy weight on him. Heikichi thought of demons as ruthless beings, like the one that crushed the heads of his parents. So why was this demon so different?

“And to tell the truth, I simply don’t like having to kill children. I used to be more coldhearted in the past, but…I’ve changed. I wonder why.” Jinya was confused by his change but felt happy about it all the same. He smiled softly.

Heikichi didn’t know Jinya’s past, but he was sure he knew what caused his change. He wasn’t so boorish as to come out and say it, though, so the two walked on in silence once more.

The silence felt less oppressive this time, and Heikichi suspected he wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

To think, even demons had family they loved.

And so, the ghost incident ended with nothing of note to be reported. If there was any takeaway at all, it was that a young man learned a little more about the hidden sides of a certain demon.

“…I see. Well, many thanks and sorry for the trouble, Kadono-san!”

“Not at all. The whole thing turned out to be a false alarm, so there’s no need to pay me any fee. The boy may still come around every now and then, though.”

“Gotcha. I’ll make sure to just do the usual if he does.”

Cherry blossom season had ended, and now Mihashiya was hurting for customers again. They did gain one new regular, though. He no longer came every day, but sometimes—as the store was about to close—a boy visited to buy manju for himself and his mother.

The shrine of Sai-no-kami became a popular place for young women to visit after a rumor spread that offering manju to the shrine would bless you with children. Strangely enough, a six-shaku-tall man and a youth in his late teens could occasionally be seen there as well.

And so, the Mihashiya ghost incident reached its end with only a few minor things worth mentioning.

“One tempura soba, ready.”

For Heikichi, things were the same as always: He still visited the soba restaurant to see Nomari, and he still hated demons. The grudge he held for his parents’ fate remained, and he ordered the same tempura soba he always did.

“Thanks for lookin’ after Heikichi for me, Jinya. Hope he wasn’t too much trouble.”

“He was fine. You’ve helped me out plenty over the years anyway, so I’m just returning the favor.”

“I doubt I’ve done much you’d feel indebted for, but sure, I’ll take it.”

“Please do. I’m not so sure you didn’t have a hand in things this time, though…”

“Oh? Whatever could you mean?”

Somegorou chatted with Jinya as he ate his usual kitsune soba. The two were close enough for each of them to grasp what the other was getting at without

directly saying it, which meant Heikichi didn't understand a lot of what they discussed. Perhaps he would one day, when he had more experience.

"One kake soba, ready. Nomari, if you would."

"Got it."

Things were still a bit awkward between Jinya and Nomari. They'd been like this for so long that it was starting to feel like the new norm. Still, it bothered Heikichi, perhaps because he liked Nomari or perhaps because he'd seen how fatherly Jinya could be.

"Here's some more tea, Heikichi-san."

"Th-thanks. As always, sorry for the trouble."

"C'mon, don't be so stiff." She giggled, making him flustered. He always got flustered when she smiled like that. This, too, was business as usual.

"Oh, by the way, I tagged along with your father on that job of his last night," he said.

"What?" Her eyes shot open. Perhaps it was a surprise Heikichi would do such a thing, considering the way he usually acted in front of her. "S-so? How'd it go?"

"Well… Nothing important really happened, I guess."

"I see…"

"Actually, you know what? There is one thing I *can* say."

Though some things had changed, Utsugi Heikichi himself was the same. He still got nervous in front of the girl he had a crush on and showed a bad attitude toward those he hated. Humans were not beings who could suddenly change right after a single experience. But even so…

"I could feel just how much that dolt dotes on his daughter."

The sight of manju being given to a mother just might have made him a little softer.

Summer Night Mirage

1

IT WAS NOW JULY in year eleven of the Meiji era (1878 AD). After Utsugi Heikichi returned to Kyoto from Tokyo, the very first thing he did was go to his master.

“Master, I have returned.”

Akitsu Somegorou worked from a room in his home on Sanjyou Street in Kyoto. While the first Akitsu Somegorou was only a metalworker, the third did woodcraft as well. In fact, he was talented enough that he’d made a name for himself as a netsuke sculpture artisan.

He’d learned metalworking from his predecessor—the second Akitsu Somegorou—and was skillful enough to make first-rate combs and hairpins. However, he preferred the calm process of woodcraft, often opting to make netsuke sculptures instead of metal items. As he aged and his stamina faded, he focused even more on woodcraft.

“Oh, Heikichi.”

Somegorou was almost fifty now, but his handiwork remained superb. He used straight chisels, carving knives, hand planers, gouge chisels—a plethora of tools one after another to turn lifeless wood into art. Heikichi had been apprenticed to Somegorou for a while now, but he still hadn’t even begun to approach his master’s level. He couldn’t help but feel both envious and dejected when he saw Somegorou at work.

Of course, Heikichi placed such importance on craft skill precisely because it was important for an artifact spirit user. He was unhappy because he himself could not yet make a powerful artifact spirit.

“So? How was Tokyo?”

“Not bad. Everything’s changin’ over there, lots of new stuff. Ate something called ‘red bean bread.’”

“Sounds like you had fun.”

Somegorou had sent Heikichi to Tokyo to supply netsuke sculptures to a merchant. It had already been eleven years since the Meiji era began, and in that time, Edo had been renamed Tokyo and much of its townscape had changed. Heikichi suspected his master had tasked him with the delivery as a form of vacation.

“What’s that, then?” Somegorou asked.

Heikichi hesitated to answer. The bundle he was carrying on one side contained a number of gifts he’d brought back, not quite by choice. “Uhh, well, I was given a comb, a netsuke sculpture, and some other things. Girl stuff, y’know.”

“You were *given* them? You didn’t buy them yourself?”

“Yeah, so… We were talking about the soba restaurant, then the conversation turned to the restaurant owner, then Nomari-san, and before I knew it, the lady gave me all this.”

In other words, he caved in and became the bearer of gifts for Nomari. It wasn’t all bad since he didn’t have to pay out of his own pocket, but it still put him in an awkward position.

“Heikichi, my boy… As a disciple of Akitsu Somegorou, you should be making your *own* gifts for Nomari-chan.”

“That’s what I said, but the lady was having none of it! I had no choice, really!”

“Ah, jeez…” Somegorou could easily envision Heikichi all flustered as the gifts were forced on him. With a chuckle, he nodded and said, “Fair enough. You might as well go see Nomari-chan, then. I’m sure the gifts are eager to meet her.”

“Huh? The gifts are? Really?” Heikichi said doubtfully.

Somegorou put on a fatherly look and said, “Really. Objects all have a place

where they're meant to be. They pass through our hands not by chance, but because they themselves wish to go somewhere. Those gifts have come all this way in search of their home."

Heikichi knit his brow, unconvinced. As a disciple of Akitsu, he knew objects could house souls of their own, but he had a hard time believing they chose their owners, especially these non-artifact spirit trinkets. "Is that really so?"

"It is. Life may take us many places, but in the end, all souls wish for a place to call home."

Heikichi had heard his master tell him such things many times before, but he still remained unconvinced. He wondered if perhaps he lacked the type of zeal needed for some kind of breakthrough.

Somegorou smiled wryly. "Don't worry, you'll understand in time. Now, why don't we go eat?"

"Oh, sure."

Somegorou cut the conversation short there, and the two went out to get lunch. Without a word exchanged, they began walking toward Demon Soba. Heikichi was always eager to go there, but he was even more so now that he had his gifts in hand. Seeing his disciple unable to conceal his excitement, Somegorou teased Heikichi, much to the latter's chagrin.

***

Like always, Nomari was helping her father at the restaurant. It was a busy lunch hour. Customers poured in one after another, and Jinya worked hard. There was no sweat on his brow, but surely he had to be tired, Nomari thought.

She watched him from the side. He didn't seem fatigued, but then again, he was always rather stoic. He never made a face, no matter how pained or saddened he was. He could keep a straight face even with a broken bone, so he could just as easily hide his fatigue from others. Something about that made Nomari feel a little sad.

Once the lunchtime rush eased a little, Jinya called out to her, having noticed her staring. “Something up, Nomari?”

“No. It’s nothing,” she curtly said. She immediately felt bad about replying that way.

Things hadn’t always been like this between them. When she was younger, she loved her father dearly, and he doted on her to the point the customers would sometimes tease him about it. They slept in the same bed, and in the morning, she would pretend to still be asleep so he would come wake her up. But they didn’t do things like that anymore, or even talk to one another much at all. She didn’t hate him or anything, though. He was awkward but not obstinate. He listened to others and was a kind father. She respected him and wanted to be his source of strength even now. But being with him felt suffocating at times. He said things that irked her in strange ways, and she didn’t know what to say when she was with him, so she would wind up saying nothing at all. She felt pathetic. She hung her head so her father wouldn’t see and quietly sighed.

“Welcome.”

She was brought back to her senses when she heard her father greet a customer entering the restaurant. She was about to belatedly say hello as well, but the customer called out before she could. “Nomari-san!”

“Oh, Heikichi-san. Welcome.” Nomari felt relieved to see a familiar face. Come to think of it, Heikichi hadn’t been around for a while because he’d gone off to Tokyo.

When she was young, Nomari had lived in Tokyo—or rather, Edo as it was known then. That was why she couldn’t help but feel a little envious that Heikichi had gone there, even if it was for work.

“Jinya, make me a kitsune soba, will ya?” Coming in after Heikichi was his master, Akitsu Somegorou. He was getting on in years but still as cheerful as ever; if anything, Jinya acted older than him.

“Sure. And what’ll you have, Utsugi?”

“Oh, just tempura soba.”

Jinya and Heikichi didn’t get along well for some reason, though they had seemed less stiff around one another lately.

Truth be told, Nomari hadn’t liked Heikichi much until recently. She used to think of him as a bratty boy who said mean things to her father. But he was at least kind to her, and he’d slowly grown able to speak less abrasively to her father, so she didn’t really hate him anymore. They’d become fairly good friends, in fact, because they were so close in age.

“Here’s your tea.” She brought Heikichi and Somegorou some tea after they sat down, and Heikichi beamed happily. He’d always been a rather restless, easily flustered person, but he was also thoughtful and easy to talk to. When things were slow in the restaurant, they often chatted like they were doing now.

“But yeah, it ended up being more of a pleasure trip than work,” he said.

“Is that right? Did you do anything special over there?”

“I guess I ate some local specialties.”

“How nice. I wish I could go!”

The two chatted happily, and Somegorou and Jinya talked on their own as well. Although their voices were too hushed for Nomari to hear, her father’s face looked grim. It seemed like they were discussing something serious, but Nomari was sure he wouldn’t tell her what it was even if she asked.

“Nomari, the noodles are ready.”

“…O-oh, coming.” She replied late, distracted by the ache in her heart. She hurriedly brought over the two bowls of soba, wondering why her father had made her do it when Heikichi and Somegorou were sitting right in front of him. Couldn’t he just have done it himself?

Just then, Heikichi stood up stiffly. With trembling hands, he held out a bundle and spoke in a shrill voice. “U-u-um, I-I brought some gifts for you,

Nomari-san!”

“Huh? For me?”

His face was bright red, perhaps out of bashfulness. He’d stuttered over his words a lot when he was younger. She thought he had improved lately, but he was acting just like he used to. Amused, she laughed softly, and he blushed even harder out of embarrassment.

“There’s a comb, a netsuke sculpture, and some other stuff in here!” he said.

“Wow, thank you. Can I open it here?”

He nodded, then turned away to hide how embarrassed he was. He may have been older than her, but he acted awfully cute.

There were no other customers in the restaurant at this point, so she went ahead and laid the package open on top of a table. Inside was a comb, a woodcraft netsuke sculpture, and quite a few other items like hairpins and such. She was no expert on these kinds of things, but she could tell they were intricately designed. They must have been fairly expensive. “These are so pretty! But is it really all right for me to take all this?”

“Don’t worry about it. I got them for free, anyway. If anything, you’d be doing me a service takin’ these off my hands since I don’t have any use for ’em. Please, take them.”

He was pretty insistent that she take his gifts, but she felt hesitant because it all looked so expensive. Seeing her so troubled, Somegorou met her eyes and nodded, as though to say she should just go on and accept the gifts. “Heikichi, calm down a bit. And there was no need to tell her you got ’em for free,” Somegorou said.

“It’s good he’s honest. And I’m sure he can’t help being nervous.”

“Oh, you’re taking his side, Jinya? What a surprise.”

“There’s nothing surprising about it at all.” More quietly, he said, “…As Nomari’s father, I’d rather have him be the way he is than suddenly start acting

smooth with her."

"Aha, I see."

Unsure what to do, Nomari looked to her father for help. She was prepared for him to tell her to refuse the gift, but to her surprise, he said, "You should accept. I see no reason why you shouldn't." Once again, his indifferent tone irked her for some reason. "Turning Utsugi down here would only cause trouble for him," he added.

"Y-yeah, what your father said! I can't use any of these, so I'd be happy if you'd take them! And, uh, I'm sure the items would be happy too, or something like that, yeah."

Nomari was still hesitant to get such expensive-looking things for free, but Heikichi seemed so insistent, and her father didn't see anything wrong with it. Refusing might actually be rude here. "I'll accept your gift, then. Thank you, Heikichi-san."

Heikichi beamed and nodded his head incessantly. Her decision must have been right if he was so happy about it. She accepted the items with a smile.

The two adults watched the exchange warmly. Somegorou had a wide grin on his face, and Jinya's expression seemed just a tad softer than usual.

And yet, Nomari couldn't help but feel annoyed about something…

After finishing dinner and cleaning up, she returned to her room. The gifts she'd received were all on a small desk there: a beautiful comb and hairpin, a charming wooden netsuke sculpture, and many other lovely trinkets. She had been hesitant to accept such pricey-looking things, but she didn't dislike them. She mentally thanked Heikichi once more and continued to gaze at what she'd received.

Her expression clouded. Not because of the gifts, but because of a pink ribbon that shared the desk with them. Her father had bought her that ribbon together

with a yukata robe when she was a child. She still tied her hair with it to this day.

When was the last time she'd gone shopping with her father? She tried to remember, then realized she couldn't and quickly abandoned the thought.

She told herself it didn't matter, then put out the paper lantern's flame and crawled into bed. When she closed her eyes, drowsiness soon followed, and sleep came in no time at all.

That night, Nomari had a dream.

She was walking under faint falling snow. Her surroundings were both foreign and nostalgically familiar, making for a strange sense of unease. Her body moved, but not of her own free will.

"What's wrong?" her father softly called out to her, holding her hand in his.

It was at that moment she realized this was a dream, for the two of them did not hold hands like this anymore. The reason she couldn't control her body was that she was nothing more than a character in the dream, only able to act as it dictated.

"Nothing."

But she was fine with that. Relieved, even. Because it was a dream, she could act without restraint and accept her father's doting love, like she once had as a child. It had been a long while since she felt so content.

Together, they walked down the street. They crossed a bridge she could swear she had seen before. Their destination came into sight: a familiar soba restaurant, but it wasn't Demon Soba. Still holding her father's hand, she crossed under the entrance curtains with him.

"Oh, Jinya-kun. Come on in."

Nomari's eyes went wide with surprise. The man welcoming them with a cheerful smile was familiar. But he was only a vague outline now. Though her

memory of him remained tucked away somewhere in her mind, it had grown faded.

“Oh, welcome, Jinya-kun.” A new person appeared, a woman with a splendid standing posture. She was familiar to Nomari as well.

“Something up, Jin-dono?” A serious-looking samurai who was sitting with a bowl of noodles cocked his head.

Distant memories resurfaced. This was not Demon Soba but *Kihee*. These people were the restaurant owner, Ofuu, and Naotsugu. Nomari knew them from long ago, back when she used to live in Edo. She’d still been young then, and she had no clear memories of those days. Why was she having such a dream now of all times?

“Hmph, so this kid’s your daughter?”

Nomari heard a voice she didn’t recognize. It came from a woman wearing a high-quality red kimono who sounded rather strong-willed. Nomari thought it was odd she would see an unfamiliar face here—wasn’t this supposed to be a dream of the past? She smiled at Nomari, unaware of how confused the latter felt.

“…Who are you?” Nomari’s question spilled from her thoughts. She honestly desired to know who the woman was.

“Me? I’m ****” The woman gave her name, but it was drowned out by noise. Nomari asked for her name once more, but instead the woman answered, “Nice to meet you, ****-chan.”

For some reason, Nomari heard her own name rendered inaudible by noise as well.

2

THE BAMBOO GROVE stood tall and proud, its leaves rustling softly in the breeze.

When the cherry blossoms bloomed or the maple leaves turned red, Sagano was flooded with visitors. But once those seasons passed, the Kyoto district turned serene once more.

It was still early in the morning. The sun was only just beginning its climb for the day. Not a soul could be seen stalking Sagano's bamboo grove.

Jinya stood alone in the stillness, the sky above still dim. In his right hand was Yarai; in his left, Yatonomori Kaneomi. The blades were drawn. He stood with his weight low, focusing on his surroundings.

Amid the rustle of leaves, he heard a feral growl. Out of the shadows of the grove stepped a beast with great stripes on its coat.

"A tiger in a bamboo grove. How tasteful," Jinya murmured. A tiger lurking in such a grove was a common subject for ink wash paintings and other art forms. There was a poetic charm to it: a dangerous beast in beautiful nature. There was nothing poetic about the very real tiger staring at Jinya, however. Its claws were extended, and it stood ready to leap at any moment.

The gigantic beast's nimble muscles flowed like a whip as it leapt, moving at a speed unthinkable for its size. Its claws and fangs were its natural-born weapons, but they rivaled even trained blades in deadliness. One strike would kill any man.

But Jinya was no man. As a demon, he would not lose in a battle of raw power. His ability, *Superhuman Strength*, would allow *him* to end this in a single strike if he wanted to. But instead, he elected to fight with swords.

He prepared to defend himself with his two blades. He parried the strike while stepping to the left, then allowed the tiger to continue past him.

His hands felt a bit numb from the impact. He thought he had redirected the force well, but his technique still proved to be imperfect. He sharpened his senses further and readied himself once more.

A swallow glided through the air, turning over once before beelining toward

Jinya. It approached fast enough to become a blur, making a shrill noise as it cut air and aimed for Jinya's neck. Now at its maximum speed, it was no different from a blade.

With the absolute minimum level of movement, he diverted the swallow's trajectory with a sword. He had no time to relax, however. Three black dogs appeared next, barking with teeth bared as they ran forward as a pack.

It was hard to call them a threat, though. Jinya swung Yarai as he stepped forward, killing one dog in the process. Without halting his momentum, he spun off his right foot and traced a half circle behind him with his left, swiping with Yarai again. He killed a second dog, but the action left himself in an awkward posture. Seeing an opportunity, the swallow danced down once more; meanwhile, the dogs he'd cut reformed with their regenerative powers. Realizing he couldn't keep this up, Jinya raised his left arm in front of himself, sword still in hand. *"Jishibari."*

Four chains drifted through the air, links clinking against one another. *Jishibari* allowed Jinya to manipulate chains, with a high level of control for each one. He began by entangling the dogs, then turned his attention to the swallow and the tiger. On his earlier swings, his body had been slightly carried along by the excess force. He needed to be more exact. This time, he would fix his flaw for sure. He slid his feet to minutely adjust his position, then focused on the fast-approaching swallow.

The swallow was swift, but not to an extent that he couldn't make it out. He moved his left foot a half step forward and whirled Yatonomori Kaneomi in a tiny arc, swinging from the elbow instead of the whole arm.

There was a slight resistance against his blade, and the swallow fell. In one fluid motion, he stepped and spun around with his right foot to face the now-charging tiger. The moment his foot touched the ground, he swung with both swords, one from above and the other from below.

With a cry, the tiger fell to the ground. A white vapor rose from its body, and

the same thing happened to the swallow and dogs. They faded away, leaving nothing behind. After confirming they were gone, Jinya let out a deep sigh.

“Well done, well done.”

Somebody began clapping in the bamboo grove. Jinya turned to see Somegorou standing there nonchalantly.

“I didn’t think you’d get my tiger in a single strike. But, eh, I guess it *is* just a paper tiger.”

The swallow, the dog spirits, and the papier-mâché hariko tiger were all artifact spirits belonging to Somegorou.

Jinya trained by himself regularly, but he’d asked Somegorou to join him this morning. He’d recently obtained Yatonomori Kaneomi and *Jishibari*, but he wasn’t versed in dual wielding or fighting with chains. He’d practiced both until he reached an acceptable level, then asked Somegorou to test him.

Jinya felt the results were middling. His handling was rough but not terrible. He could use this in real combat to some degree.

“Sorry for the trouble,” he said.

“Nah, it’s no big deal. So, what’s the verdict?”

“A bit lacking, I’m afraid.”

Jinya’s dual wielding was passable, but there was still much left to be desired elsewhere. He looked at his left hand with a thoughtful squint. *Jishibari* should be capable of more.

“Jishibari used six chains when we met and seven in the past. But I’ve only been able to summon four, and I can’t suppress movement and abilities like she could.”

“So the ability’s weakened?”

“That’s what it looks like. This has never happened before, though…”

There had been other abilities Jinya couldn’t use like their original owners.

Indomitable gave him an invulnerable body, but he couldn't move while it was active. That also meant he couldn't activate it unless he was at a complete halt, which stopped him from wielding it as effectively as Tsuchiura could. The ability itself was the same, but Jinya was nowhere near Tsuchiura's skill level in being able to discern attacks and control his body.

But the issue with *Jishibari* was different. The ability used to allow its user to manipulate seven chains and restrict something with each one, but now it only allowed the user to manipulate four chains. This wasn't an issue of application. The ability itself had degraded.

"Is it really that odd?" Somegorou asked. "Jishibari was originally a part of Magatsume, so it makes sense to think that the ability itself is something like leftover scraps." In other words, Jinya might not be able to receive an ability's full power without devouring the main source itself. Somegorou avoided directly pointing this out, as he knew Magatsume's relationship to Jinya.

"I see. Then I guess there's no point mulling it over any more."

"Looks like it."

Jinya sheathed his swords. He exhaled the hot air from his lungs and slowly took in a breath of the summer air, feeling better than before. "Thank you, Somegorou."

"Not at all; I needed the practice as well. Don't want to be caught rusty when the chips are down. Incidentally, well…aren't you stronger with just one sword?"

It stung to have the truth pointed out. Despite his practice, Jinya knew that his dual-wielding skills were superficial at best, and he was far more proficient with one sword. He was about to move things along with a noncommittal reply, but another voice spoke up first.

"Excuse me?" Yatonomori Kaneomi said from her sheath. She did not take kindly to hearing that she was holding her supposed husband back. *"I knew you were a rude individual, but could you not make light of my husband's efforts like*

that, Akitsu-sama?”

“Well, gee, I’m sorry. But he really was a little rough dual-wielding. He’s probably better off fighting the way he’s used to.”

It may have been hard for Kaneomi to hear, but Somegorou wasn’t wrong. Jinya had fought and trained with Yarai as his only sword for decades, and he’d had two swords for less than a year. He wasn’t going to overcome decades of experience just like that.

“I thought so myself, to tell the truth,” Jinya said.

“I had a feelin’. But you’re going to stick to it anyway?”

“I am. I devoured Nagumo Kazusa’s soul and have been asked by Kaneomi to be her new wielder. This is my duty to fulfill.”

His reasoning was based entirely on emotion, to tell the truth. He did not know who Nagumo Kazusa was as a person, but he was touched by Kaneomi’s desire to be her sword. Kaneomi had failed to protect Kazusa and was being left behind by the changing times, but she kept her head held high and ultimately carried out her mission regardless. Such a sword, one so worthy of respect, had asked *him* of all people to be her new master. In no world could he disgrace her by failing to use her.

“I see. But this will make you weaker. Is it worth it?” Somegorou didn’t back down, purely out of concern. He knew bits of Jinya’s past from the times they’d shared drinks together and worried all the more because of it.

“We all have things we can’t give up on.” Jinya could only reply in a way that left no room for rebuttal.

Though exasperated, Somegorou relented. He seemed to have expected Jinya’s reply to a degree.

“I’ve lived almost all my life with a sword,” Jinya continued, “That’s why I do not dare disgrace one who lives *as* a sword. I want to become a man who can give meaning to Kaneomi, especially because I’ve devoured her master.”

There was a time when he'd thought of nothing but becoming stronger. He focused only on his ultimate goal and abandoned all other pursuits, wishing for the ability to wield his blade without wavering. But as the years passed, he took on too many burdens and allowed his sword to grow impure. He wasn't much different from his old self, but he did have more things he wanted to hold dear now.

He was an antiquated man who lived by the sword in an era that was trying to do away with relics like him. But even so, he wanted to give meaning to Kaneomi's being, to someone who fought to live as a sword. There was no logic to it. His reasoning was emotional. But he was not sorry that he had become someone who could choose such a path.

"What a worthy husband you are."

"Again with that nonsense?" Jinya chided.

Kaneomi's voice was cheerful. Others might think Jinya was simply too obstinate to give something up, but she was similarly stubborn herself. Their being a married couple was a joke, but the two just might have been made for one another in a different sense.

Somegorou said, "I know you can be stubborn, but it's on you and no one else if ya die trying to 'fulfill your duty.'"

"I know. That's why I'm here training: to not die," Jinya replied dryly.

Somegorou made a weary sigh. He clearly thought Jinya was mad to shoulder such a heavy burden. "You can be a real pain in the ass, y'know?"

"So I've been told."

"Heh. Not *your* problem, eh?"

To be fair, Jinya thought Somegorou was insane as well to stay friends with such an unreasonable and foolish demon.

Along his journey, Jinya had gained many hard-to-come-by things. His friendship with Somegorou was one of them. The two were a demon and a

demon hunter; one misstep and their fates would have been that of enemies. Despite the way he sometimes acted, Jinya was truly thankful for the good luck that had brought them together as friends.

"Well, if you're fine with it, then that's that." Somegorou gazed softly at Kaneomi. "I guess your side is just the place where Kaneomi was meant to be."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean?"

Kaneomi and Jinya's voices overlapped. Somegorou broke into a broad grin, laughing at how synchronized the two were.

"Nothin'. Just thinking about how objects choose their masters, is all." The man continued to laugh happily.

After finishing his morning training, Jinya parted with Somegorou and returned to Demon Soba. He was running a little late and needed to start his prep work quickly.

He changed, then prepared the restaurant like he usually did. Midway through, however, he realized he still hadn't seen Nomari's face that morning. Perhaps she was still asleep? He went to check on her, putting a hand on the screen door, then froze. She probably wouldn't like him coming into her room without permission like this. Instead of opening the door, he called out to her. "Nomari, are you awake?"

No reply came. He called out once more and still received no response. Now worried, he slid the door open—albeit with some hesitation. He wondered if she might be ill, but he saw her breath was steady as she slept and concluded otherwise.

"Nomari, it's morning."

"…Father…?" Finally, she responded. She stirred slightly as her eyes flitted open and looked at him drowsily.

“Are you all right? Feeling sick?” he asked.

“No, I’m fine. I’ll get up in just a little bit.” Perhaps because she was still half-asleep, she spoke a bit childishly, like she used to do.

He was a bit surprised by her behavior, but he had no further business with her if she was awake, so he left the room and resumed his morning preparations.

“Hey, Father?” The two were quietly eating breakfast around a low dining table when Nomari started a conversation for once.

“Yeah?”

Her gaze wandered like she had something she was nervous to bring up. She hemmed and hawed for a while before finally working up the will to look him in the eyes. “Um, you used to visit this one soba restaurant a lot, right?”

“I did.” He still remembered the place even now: Kihee. He wouldn’t give up the time he spent there for the world. Alongside the mistaken path he chose, he had found bits of hard-to-come-by warmth. He used to seek nothing but power in his life, letting hatred guide his blade, but the time he spent at Kihee had changed him for the better. “I could never forget that place.”

“Then do you still remember the others who also ate there?”

“Of course. Well, besides me, it was really just Naotsugu. Why?” The questions felt rather odd. Nomari was still young when she visited Kihee, so he figured she wouldn’t recall the place well. But if she was bringing it up, then maybe she actually did remember it? Why bring it up now of all times, though?

She looked down with a troubled expression on her face, not answering his question. After some silence, she looked back up and hesitantly asked, “Um, are you sure there wasn’t anyone else?”

“Huh?”

“There should’ve been another person. There was the old restaurant owner,

Ofuu-san, Naotsugu-san, and…a young woman.”

The first face that came to mind when he thought of a young woman at Kihee was, as one would expect, Ofuu. Her splendid standing posture and graceful smile left a lasting impression. But there was another young woman who sometimes visited Kihee. He recalled her cheeky smile and narrowed his eyes nostalgically. “Ah, yes. Her.”

He’d omitted mentioning her earlier because Nomari never met her, but there were other Kihee regulars besides Naotsugu. If things had been just slightly different, he and that young woman might have ended up as siblings. But it wasn’t to be. Jinya had taken away someone dear to her.

Before he even realized it, he was clenching his teeth. Though there was nostalgia to be found in her memory, pain was there as well. But he couldn’t act pathetic in front of his daughter.

“I’m surprised you know about her. I’m pretty sure you haven’t met her before,” he said, keeping his expression calm. His unrest quickly faded, and his voice didn’t tremble at all. Aging had its perks; he could control his emotions better now.

“Oh, umm, it was Akitsu-san! Yeah, Akitsu-san told me about her.”

“Is that right? Just what does that idiot think he’s doing…?” Jinya made an exasperated sigh.

Nomari sank her shoulders with all-too-obvious relief. She had clearly lied about Somegorou telling her things, but Jinya let it go. He didn’t know why she had asked those questions, but the look on her face had been serious, which made him think she wasn’t asking out of mere curiosity. That being the case, he’d rather not pelt her back with more questions.

Still, it weighed on his mind. If Somegorou hadn’t told her those things, then who? There weren’t many people who knew of those times. The restaurant owner and Naotsugu were dead, and Ofuu was unlikely to be the one. Who could it be, then, and why? Jinya only knew one thing: If they were drawing

close to Nomari for sinister reasons, then he would deal with them appropriately.

“Nomari, be careful, all right?”

“Huh? O-okay?”

The conversation ended there. He couldn’t help but warn her. He sipped his miso soup, his expression slightly stiffer than usual.

***

A completely ordinary day passed, and night came.

Nomari rolled atop her bed and sighed. She’d lied again. She lied to her father as though it was nothing. Since when had she been like this, unable to express her true feelings but able to spout lies without a second thought? She knew she hadn’t been like this as a child. Why couldn’t she properly communicate with her father anymore?

“…Let’s just sleep.” Feeling oddly tired, she crawled under her sheets. She closed her eyes, and her drowsiness soon increased. She eased into a deep, deep slumber.

She had a dream.

She was eating soba with her father while snow gently fell outside. The restaurant owner and Ofuu were there, as were Naotsugu and the woman she didn’t recognize.

“So, how’ve things been lately?”

There was one more unfamiliar face this time, a man. He smiled cheerfully when the restaurant owner started chatting him up. “So-so, I guess. I had no idea I’d be *this* swamped with work once I became manager!”

“What’re you talking about? You’d obviously have more responsibilities if you moved up. What are you acting so surprised about?”

“Sheesh, I was just making chitchat, Miss ****.” The man said the woman’s name, but it was once again drowned out by noise.

Who were these two? Nomari was pretty sure she had never met them; they didn’t feel like people she had simply forgotten. Everything else about the soba restaurant was just as it used to be, making their presence seem even more unnatural.

“What’s the matter, ****?” her father asked. For some reason, Nomari’s name was muffled by noise as well.

It was only a dream, though, so there was no need to pay it any mind…or so she told herself. Her thoughts were lucid, so it was hard not to think about it.

“****-chan.” Right when Nomari was trying to think, the young woman called out and interrupted her thoughts. She looked about the same age as Nomari really was, maybe a little older. Her tone and attitude made her seem rather assertive, but the way she stood was prim and proper. The unfamiliar man had addressed her as “Miss,” so maybe she was from some well-to-do family?

“Y-yes?” Nomari replied, taken a bit off guard.

Her father noticed her nervousness and said with a flat expression, “This woman may look a bit intimidating, but there’s no need to be worried.”

“Wow. Rude much?” the young woman said. Despite her complaint, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

Nomari continued to experience the dream, a friendly mood filling the air. It was a continuation of yesterday’s dream. This was the first time a dream of hers had ever kept going like this, but she quite liked it. The inside of the restaurant was warm despite the snow outside. For some reason, she wanted to watch the events play out just a bit more.

“Thanks for the meal.” Her father finished eating first and pulled out some coins, which he put on the table. Then he stood up and adjusted the sword on his hip.

Ofuu noticed this and asked, “…Heading out for the usual?”

Past or present, his way of life remained the same.

“Yeah.”

“You never change, do you, Jinya-kun?”

“Sorry. It’s just the way I am.”

“Jeez…” Ofuu said with an exasperated sigh. Still, her tone was gentle.

The two of them stood close enough to reach out and touch one another. Jinya’s expression was as flat as it always was, but he did seem a bit softer than usual.

“Don’t push yourself.”

“I won’t.”

“Come back safe.”

“I will. You shouldn’t worry so much.”

Nomari felt her heart ache. She’d had an inkling in the past as well, but seeing things play out in front of her made it crystal clear: The two of them had something special that no one could come between. They were talking to each other, but at the same time there were things left unsaid that were understood between the two. Seeing them have a moment of their own made Nomari feel sad.

The same was probably true for the unknown young woman. She gave a soft sigh as she watched Jinya and Ofuu talk.

“Aren’t you going to say anything to him?” Nomari asked the question without even realizing it. The woman’s face in profile had looked so terribly helpless, like a child abandoned by a parent. She must have been bearing gloomy thoughts of her own.

“I don’t have the right. Not after I hurt him,” she replied, looking at her feet with a smile.

Nomari didn't know the woman's name, but she felt she could connect with her because they both felt a similar pain. The two seemed a lot like each other, both hesitating in similar ways and bearing similar sadnesses.

"I said something awful to him," the woman continued.

"Then you should apologize."

"…It would've been nice if I could've."

Nomari had thought the woman was brash at first, but she turned out to be surprisingly subdued. The smile she made was soft yet mixed with resignation.

"I really did want to apologize, but I just couldn't bring myself to go see him. I was too afraid to meet him…even though I was the one who hurt him."

"Oh…"

"Yeah. We used to be kind of close, so I'm sure he would have forgiven me if I said I was sorry." But she couldn't express her true feelings. Her soft, slow tone and wistful, dispassionate gaze made that clear.

Nomari's heart ached. She saw her situation mirrored in the woman's.

"But I felt like things would never go back to the way they were. I just knew he'd never look at me the same way again, and that scared me enough to make me freeze in my tracks, so I never did go apologize to him. How pathetic, huh?"

Neither of them could work up the courage to apologize. There was so much they wanted to say, but they were never able to get it out. Really, they were so pathetic.

Why couldn't she have just stayed a little girl and continued to indulge in her father's love like she had before?

"Take care, Jinya-kun," Ofuu said.

"I will."

Their tender exchange was painful to watch. White snow covered the scenery outside, yet it remained warm and comfortable inside. Still, Nomari thought this

dream was a sad one.

3

NOMARI HAD THAT DREAM AGAIN. This was the fourth time…or was it the fifth already?

Things always unfolded the same way. She would walk in the snow with her father to the old, familiar soba restaurant. They would eat soba and chat there, then her father would leave to go demon hunting. Afterward, she would talk for a while with the young woman. Nobody else ever spoke to them while they talked. In fact, nobody else could even be seen once they began talking.

At first, Nomari wondered why, but she soon accepted that was just the way it was. Logic need not apply to a dream, after all. At any rate, she was at Kihee again tonight, talking alone with the young woman.

“He told me he couldn’t eat it much as a child, so isobe mochi became, and still is, a favorite of his. I remember being so thrilled to learn I was the only one who knew that about him…”

Unsurprisingly, the two were talking about Jinya. The young woman knew things about him that Nomari didn’t. Listening was so much fun that Nomari had stopped caring just what this dream might be.

“There’s something I want to ask about…”

“Sure. What is it, ****-chan?”

Once again, Nomari’s name was drowned out by noise, but she was used to it by now. She paid it no mind and continued.

“Um, what is your, um… How do you and my father, you know…” Nomari stumbled over her words. It was too embarrassing to ask her the question directly, but she didn’t know how to be roundabout with it.

The young woman giggled. “You want to know what my relationship with your father was?”

“U-um, yes.” Nomari nodded in embarrassment.

The young woman smiled softly. A bit dejectedly, she said, “Hmm… Good question.”

Nomari thought the woman was just dodging the question and got ready to press her for a real answer, but she quickly thought better of it. The woman’s gaze was distant, like she was thinking back on something long in the past. Nomari suspected that hounding her for an answer would only hurt her. The woman’s face in profile seemed to display her thoughts like an open book, but Nomari found she still couldn’t read the emotions in her heart.

Unable to bear the silence any longer, Nomari nervously asked, “Did you love him?”

“Looking back, I’m not so sure.” The woman made a strange smile of exasperation and fatigue. Her own emotions seemed too jumbled for even her to grasp. Even so, it was clear that Jinya had been special to her. “But what I can say is that your father and I were cut from the same cloth. We both pretended to be strong, even though we were actually weak. That’s why I felt so at peace by his side: because I could tell we both felt the same pain. But in the end…” She looked down sadly. “…I couldn’t become anything more than a sparrow.”

Nomari wanted to ask what the woman’s weak, resigned words meant. But before she could, she awoke from the dream.

***

“What was your relationship with her?”

Nomari’s abrupt question made Jinya do a double take. “With whom?”

“The woman who used to be at the old soba restaurant.”

“Oh. You really like talking about that place lately, huh?”

Nomari had been bringing up the old soba restaurant a lot during dinner as of late. What was more, she’d been asking a lot about that one young woman. And for the life of him, Jinya couldn’t figure out why.

There hadn't been anyone strange interacting with her in the past few days, so it didn't seem like anyone was feeding her information about his past. That only left some kind of supernatural means. Maybe someone had the power to covertly show her images of the past. How would he stop that, though? She didn't seem particularly troubled by anything. Perhaps the best he could do was begrudgingly let things play out for the time being.

"She was a close friend, I think," he answered. "But if things had gone differently, we might have ended up family instead." He tried to keep an air of calm to hide his hesitation, but his answer was genuine. If he had done things differently, he might have ended up with her as a younger sister in exchange for never meeting the woman he fell in love with. That was why he could never get angry at her, no matter how cheeky she got.

"So…you liked her?" Nomari asked.

"I didn't hate her, I guess."

"But you didn't try to patch things up?" Nomari seemed to know about their falling-out. There was no blame in her voice, only honest curiosity. Jinya was stunned. Such a question could only come from someone who more or less knew what happened. Realizing that herself, she hurriedly added, "I-I heard you two fought and didn't make up. From, uh, Akitsu-san, that is. Yeah."

Somegorou was an old acquaintance of Jinya's, but he wouldn't know about all that. It was a shoddy excuse, even for one thought up on the spot. Jinya didn't point out her obvious lie, but he did feel a bit sad.

Nomari wasn't a child anymore. She was old enough to have her own secrets, and to lie to keep them as well. It was obvious that she would grow up one day, but his heart ached all the same. He sighed softly, lamenting how difficult fatherhood could be.

"…I didn't have the right to meet her again. Not after I hurt her." His heart ached some more, this time from the memories of the past flitting through his mind. The coldness of that snowy night and her painfully thorny words

remained vivid in his memory to this day.

“…Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“…No, it’s nothing.”

Nomari shook her head, but she had clearly been unnerved by something. Was what he said really that strange? He didn’t think so. But then why had she reacted like that?

“Couldn’t you have apologized to her?” she said, continuing somewhat hesitantly. Once again, there was no sting to her words; she wasn’t blaming him for his inaction. But her eyes did carry a strange earnestness. He thought he could see his old friend in her, asking him why he didn’t try to meet with her again.

“No. I took away something that was dear to her, and it’s not something I can be excused for. Even if I was somehow forgiven, I could never return what I deprived her of.”

“That’s…that’s not…”

“Apologizing would only put another burden on her, so I chose not to meet her again.” Something about seeing his old friend in Nomari was making him blurt out his true thoughts. There was no way he could ever apologize to her. What could he even say when he was the one who killed her father? She never would have wanted to see him again anyway. She had always hated demons, and so having one close to her would only sicken her.

All in all, it wasn’t too complicated: Things fell apart, so the two drifted away from one another.

“Occasionally, though, I do wonder to myself… If I had done things just a little better, then maybe things would be different now.” Despite the way things ended, they had undeniably been close to each other at one point. He couldn’t help but think about what could have been, even when he knew it was too late

to matter.

"…I see." Nomari hung her head, apparently depressed.

"What's wrong?" he asked, worried by her sudden change.

"Nothing…"

"But—"

"I said it's nothing. I'm going to sleep now." She spoke matter-of-factly, with a tinge of irritation in her voice. She firmly set her chopsticks down and stood up, seemingly fed up with the conversation. Her face in profile showed more regret than displeasure, as if she were holding back tears.

"It's still pretty early, though."

"I feel tired all of a sudden. Sorry," she apologized. Then she went to her room without looking back.

He listened to her footsteps as she walked away, growing more distant with each step. Just because of her absence, the living room suddenly felt barren.

***

Even now, the snowfall showed no sign of stopping.

Today's dream was different from the usual one.

Nomari was at a big house, sitting out on the veranda next to the young woman. They looked out on the courtyard together. It was snowing, yet it didn't feel cold. But then again, it was a dream.

"Right. Nothing that exists is changeless, except demons. That's why your demon was born. These are your feelings that have become stagnant."

Jinya was facing a grotesque demon whose skin looked like it was burned. He stepped in and swung, twisting his whole body for a horizontal strike.

"You're in the way of those trying to live in the present. Begone."

It was over in one strike. The demon lay behind him in two halves.

Then her father and the demon's corpse faded away, leaving only the courtyard and the softly falling snow.

"Your father was my bodyguard this one time. He was so strong. I thought he looked like one of the swordmasters in those tall tales." The woman narrowed her eyes nostalgically. She told Nomari more about what happened when Jinya, a ronin, helped her, the daughter of a merchant. She took her time with the story, enjoying herself greatly as she recounted it.

Hearing the woman talk about so many things about her father that she herself didn't know hurt Nomari a little. She listened with a complicated jumble of feelings.

"Are you all right, ****-chan? You seem down today." The young woman smiled kindly at her.

Nomari knew the woman was only looking out for her, but she felt ashamed her gloom was so obvious anyway. But she soon remembered it was just a dream, and so she let a question that she wanted to ask spill forth. "Do you think my father liked you?"

Jinya had said he might have become family with the woman. That meant they must have been romantically close, close enough to consider marriage.

Even now, she could hear her father's weak but tender voice echoing in her ears. His voice lingered in her mind so much precisely because his words had hurt her. Was the life he lived with Nomari a compromise? Would he have chosen a life with the young woman over one with Nomari if he could? She knew he didn't mean what he said in that way, but that did nothing to stop her from imagining things.

"I don't know what your father thought of me, but as for myself…yes. Yes, I think I did like him," the woman said.

Of course, Nomari thought. Her chest felt tight.

“But my feelings weren’t loving ones,” the woman added nonchalantly.

Confused by the ease with which the woman spoke, Nomari snuck a glance at her face. Her expression was shockingly calm.

“I knew of his weakness, but I ignored the weight of the burden he bore. I’m sure that disqualifies me from calling my feelings for him love.”

She was sharing her tale of unrequited love, but she showed no grief, only sadness over this and that. Nomari had no words with which she could reply to the woman’s crystal-clear eyes.

“I am a sparrow, one who could only fluff out her plumage to ward off winter’s cold. But once winter passed, he was already gone from my side. How silly of me, huh?”

The woman smiled self-deprecatingly. For some reason, Nomari saw her own gloom reflected in her.

…For some reason? No, Nomari knew the explanation. It was why she didn’t fear these continued inexplicable dreams, and why she felt so peaceful talking with the woman—*she and the woman were the same*. Their fear of their rampant imagination stopped them from saying what they truly wanted to say. They were stuck in place, unable to move forward or backward.

“Did something happen with your father?”

And because the two were the same, the woman would notice Nomari’s pain, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. She saw straight through her with a soft smile. Once again, Nomari could not find the words to express herself.

“I see. Then do you want to stay a little longer?”

Nomari hesitated. But she was even more reluctant to return, so she nodded.

Endless snow continued to fall, dyeing their surroundings white.

And so, Nomari remained in her dream.

***

“What’s that? Nomari-chan ain’t wakin’ up?”

Somegorou came to Demon Soba for lunch as usual. The entrance curtains weren’t up to indicate the restaurant was open, but the door wasn’t locked, so he had let himself in.

Jinya was exhausted from worry, paying little attention to his surroundings; he didn’t even notice Somegorou until the man spoke up. He sat slumped deep in his chair, looking defeated enough to make even Somegorou a little flustered for once.

Saying only a few words, Jinya led Somegorou to a tidy tatami-matted room in the back. The gifts Heikichi brought back were on a table, and Nomari was sleeping peacefully in a bed laid out nearby.

“She won’t wake no matter what I try. I’ve even brought a doctor to see her, but they couldn’t find anything wrong. She’s just sleeping, but she won’t wake up.” Jinya bent down and touched his daughter’s cheek. Her flesh was warm, and her pulse was still steady. Her breathing was regular and there didn’t seem to be anything outwardly wrong, but she just wouldn’t wake up. “What do I do?” Jinya’s usual stony face was crumbling under worry, and he sounded desperate. His mind was a mess. He couldn’t think of any possible solutions that made sense. All he could do was watch her sleep.

“Please try to calm down. Panicking won’t help you here.”

“I know… I know, but still…”

Kaneomi was trying to help, but he couldn’t make himself calm. Not when his daughter was involved.

“It’s okay. There’s no point in forcin’ yourself to be calm,” Somegorou said. Despite the tense mood, he seemed as laid back as could be.

Jinya was stunned by the man’s calmness.

“If you’re too worked up to think, then I’ll do the thinkin’ for ya. I can stay calm ’nough for the both of us,” Somegorou said. He sounded flippant, but by

no means was he belittling Jinya's plight. His smile inspired hope. "You're too worried about Nomari-chan, right? Then just tell me everythin' you've noticed; I just might be able to piece together somethin' your head was too worked up to figure out."

Jinya looked down and sighed softly. Though left unsaid, his friend's message was clear: *You're not alone here*. That brought Jinya back to his senses. He lifted his face, feeling calmer now, although not quite back to the level where he would have liked to be. "Sorry. I lost my composure there."

"Well, at least you noticed. That's half the battle."

"Yeah. I can't help but feel like you manipulated me into calming down, though."

"Ouch, you make it sound like I did a bad thing. Not that I *didn't* manipulate you."

He truly had a great friend. Even in his panic, his friend's kindness could pull him back to reality.

"Kadono-dono…"

"Sorry about that, Kaneomi."

"Not at all. I've been distressed like that before. But for Nomari-chan's sake, we'd better all take a moment to breathe." She was right; panicking here served no one. Nomari was clearly wrapped up in something unnatural, which was exactly what her father dealt with in his line of work. Panicking was the last thing he of all people should be doing.

"You're right. I thought I'd learned to control my emotions better, but it seems I'm still a rookie as a father."

"That's fine. It is my duty as your wife to make up for your flaws."

"You're still going on about that?" Jinya chided. They were far from married, but the impudent joke did ease his tension.

"Heh. I see your relationship is going swimmingly," Somegorou said.

“But of course,” Kaneomi stated proudly.

Somegorou grinned wryly, then turned serious as he looked at the sleeping Nomari. “Stay by her side for now, Jinya. I’ll look into things.”

“Thank you.” Jinya was deeply grateful. He sat down and held his daughter’s hand, which was soft, tiny, and warm. Being ageless, he could not remain with her forever. He knew that a time would come when he would have to let her hand go.

But he wished to stay by her side for just a bit longer.

***

Snow fell without end, and their drifting hearts continued to watch a white dream.

“So you do *remember after all.”*

“Sorry, it took me a minute. You were a lot younger when we last met.”

“I guess I can’t fault you for not recognizing me right away. I see you haven’t changed a bit though.”

“I’m the type that doesn’t show age much.”

“Are you trying to make an enemy of women the world over?”

A sudden chance encounter resulted in him saving her.

“I myself sometimes question just what I’m doing this all for. What end does it serve?”

“You’re serious?”

“I am. Although…yes, perhaps I do it because it’s all I have left.”

They chatted at a teahouse over some isobe mochi. She found weakness in a man she had seen as entirely strong up until then.

“It’s…difficult to hear you call me your brother. I’m a failure of a brother, so hearing you call me yours is, well… I suppose it reminds me of how pathetic I

am.”

They walked under snow willows together, and she learned about the worries he couldn’t part with.

“Spending our long, long lives in search of where our hearts are meant to return is simply our purpose.”

“Can I really find such a place?”

“You will. We live for that very purpose.”

Slowly, his heart began to change. Something about that made her happy.

There were sad moments too, though. He and the soba restaurant girl seemed to share something special between just the two of them, and it hurt to see them flaunt their bond. But he still came to protect her whenever she was in danger. She never said it, but she depended on his broad back. She believed he would always be there to protect her.

“Stay away from me, you monster!”

And yet, she had hurt him with her words on that night of endless snow.

She couldn’t blame it on the liquor she drank. She and she alone destroyed all the two had built up together before anything could even come of it.

Nomari saw the young woman’s past through the dream. Though it had all happened long ago, she felt like she was being shown a premonition of her own future.

“To save me, he revealed a secret he’d kept hidden. And yet I said something so hurtful to him…”

The scene changed. Their hearts again sheltered under the snow willows they’d seen before.

Snow continued to fall even though the spring flowers were in bloom. The small, white petals swayed, indistinguishable from the snow. The transient sight was a genuine beauty to behold, but it was equally heartrending.

“Why couldn’t I have said something, *anything* else?”

People and distant sights Nomari couldn’t possibly know appeared before her. She finally understood that this dream she was seeing wasn’t her own. It belonged to the young woman. Nomari had simply wandered into it, learning of all the past events that haunted her. That was why nobody could say Nomari’s name without it being drowned out by noise. The young woman didn’t know her name. She could only gaze back on a pure-white dream that was long beyond change.

“If I had said something kinder that day instead, then perhaps you would bear a trace of me now.”

The young woman’s whisper tore at Nomari’s heart. Her words had been soft enough to easily pass by unnoticed, but that only made it hurt even more. Nomari shook her head fiercely. The woman misunderstood. There was no reality in which Nomari could be part of the situation she desired. “No…”

After all, Nomari wasn’t even her father’s child. When she awoke, they would again be nothing more than strangers.

“I’m just an abandoned child that he took in and raised. I’m not his real daughter.” Her heart ached. Nomari considered Jinya to be her true father. She had even told him so herself. But she didn’t have it in her to ask if he himself thought of her as a true daughter.

Her father was a kind man. He allowed those without a place to go, like Kaneomi and Asagao, to stay in his home without expecting anything in return. But what if she were only receiving the same treatment? What if he’d only taken her in out of kindness toward a poor abandoned child?

What if he didn’t think of her as a daughter?

That worry was always there within her, making her too afraid to ask her father the truth. “My father is too kind to say it, but he’d be happier without someone like me in his life. I can’t do a thing for him.”

Her father would absolutely never say it, but she truly was baggage to him. She was always alone on the receiving end, unable to do anything in return for her father. Such a thing had been fine when she was still a child. She could even naively claim she would grow up to be his mother one day and pamper him in turn. But a lot of time had passed since then. She'd grown taller and was on her way to being a full-fledged adult, yet she still selfishly relied on him like she had before.

It hurt. She hated how useless she was.

"That's why…that's why…" She suddenly realized she was crying, hurt by her own words.

Why had things become like this? It all used to be different. The two of them could be honest with one another. She still loved her father and harbored the same hopes for the future now, so why did things feel so suffocating?

"I see. You know, I'm relieved." The young woman spoke softly. Her voice felt out of place after Nomari's tears and lamentations.

Nomari lifted her face and, through her blurry vision, saw a smile made wistful by memories of long-past days.

"I think I liked your father. We were both weak in the same way, so I thought we could support one another. I… I wanted to be there to help him." She hadn't realized it at the time, but he was so terribly dear to her. She wanted to be someone he could count on, and, if at all possible, the one closest to him. "But I see he has someone else by his side now." Her wish had gone unmet, but that was fine. At least, her slow, satisfied sigh seemed to say so. "He's a frail man, but he doesn't let it show. That's why I'm relieved to know he has someone like you with him."

Nomari wanted to avert her gaze from the woman, precisely because she knew she meant what she said. Nomari couldn't accept the woman's direct feelings in an equally direct manner, for she thought of herself as a twisted person. She believed she had failed to become a worthy daughter. "No… All I've

done is hurt my father…”

Her father probably didn’t want her around. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before…

“Ah…” Just then, Nomari finally realized why she and her father could no longer talk to one another like they used to.

She was nothing more than an abandoned child he took in, meaning they had nothing real to tie them together. If her father came to dislike her, then they would be father and daughter no more, and part of her had always been aware of that.

That was why she was afraid. She was afraid her father would regret taking in a child like her. She wanted to stay in his good graces forever, but there was so much she couldn’t do. Fearful of disappointing her father, she distanced herself from him. As time passed, that meant they couldn’t properly communicate with one another. “I’m such an idiot. Just what have I been doing…?”

She became frustrated by their inability to communicate, so she vented her anger on him like a fool. She let her imagination scare her into lashing out at the very father she loved.

She trembled at the realization of how weak she was. Surely her father was fed up with such a tiresome daughter?

“There’s just no way he…” Through tears, Nomari tried to finish the damning words.

But a gentle voice cut her off. “I once thought the same thing.”

The snowy dream was a symbol. The young woman’s feelings remained here, forever buried in unending snow and unable to overcome the winter.

“I couldn’t be brave. There was so much I wanted to say, but I couldn’t bring myself to let out a single thing.”

He had saved her, but she couldn’t thank him.

She had hurt him, but she couldn’t apologize.

Words left unsaid piled up one after another, until eventually the end arrived, and she couldn't even say goodbye.

"It takes very little for a bond to break for good. At some point, we stopped noticing when we brushed past one another. That was when I realized how feelings can fade."

She smiled softly, without a trace of sadness on her face. She reminded Nomari of an untrodden snowy field; her heart was pure white and entirely unblemished.

"My heart no longer aches. Now I can look back and smile at all the good memories we made together. The pain of hurting another person and being hurt is forgotten in time…but something else is lost in the process."

The two grew apart, and someone else became his source of strength. The pain gradually faded, as too did the pining she used to do. What once was unmistakably dear became something beyond recollection. Something else had dried up alongside her tears.

"You mustn't become like me."

That was why she had to show Nomari this dream.

She reached out and softly held Nomari's hand, as if to prevent her happy days from slipping through her tiny childish fingers. "I can no longer remember the shape my heart took back then, but it's not too late for you."

"But…"

"You'll be fine. Just a tiny bit of courage is all you need. This is him we're talking about, after all."

Unspoken feelings piled higher like snow. They continuously fell in the depths of the heart and turned it cold. But if winter ended and the snow could finally melt, then the feelings waiting out the cold would spread their wings and take flight into a spring sky.

"I couldn't do it. That's why I want to at least help you."

Two lost souls held hands in a pure-white expanse. The touch of their palms left a warmth hot enough to melt sad dreams away.

“Why would you go so far for me?” Nomari had to ask. This dream should have been a manifestation of the young woman’s lingering regrets. Nomari thought she was only an outsider who had just wandered in, but now it sounded like she had been specifically invited. Why was this young woman doing so much to help someone whose name she didn’t even know?

“Ah. Well, I guess it’s because I felt like I owed your father.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s thanks to him that I could be with my own father.”

Nomari didn’t understand, but the young woman showed no intention of explaining further. Instead, she smiled playfully and teasingly added in a stiff falsetto, “At any rate, it’s good to think about what one owes to their parents.”

The young woman was clearly just imitating someone else’s words, and it didn’t take much to guess whose.

“Um…”

“Yes?”

Nomari still didn’t understand why the young woman was doing all this for her, especially when she claimed she liked Jinya but her feelings weren’t ones of love. However, she still wanted to thank her for her kindness. She looked the woman in the eyes and said, “I think… I think you really did love my father after all.” She didn’t want the young woman’s feelings to end up as nothing, so she gave a clear shape to the hazy outline of what could once have been love.

“Thank you.” The young woman’s heart remained unknown to Nomari, but she smiled ticklishly, so Nomari must have succeeded in her aims to some extent.

“I know it’s a bit late, but would you tell me your name?” Nomari asked. The woman’s name had been drowned out by noise many times so far, but she had

a feeling she could hear it properly now if they tried.

The woman shook her head, smiling broadly as the snow fell silently behind her. “I’ve forever been nothing but a sparrow.”

The snowfall began to lessen. Then, when it ended, the snow became only a memory. As if to signal winter’s end, the white expanse blurred away.

A single snowflake fell in front of Nomari. Without thinking, she reached out and let it fall into her hand. She grasped the tiny flake firmly in her palm as though trying to keep it with her. She smiled in a manner reminiscent of melting snow, finally understanding something.

“…But I think now, finally, I’ve become a clam.”

It had been quite a circuitous journey, but here, in this moment, the nameless woman’s first love finally met its end.

Once again, the dream drew to a close.

She felt like she could hear somebody calling her name from both nearby and far away. Her mind felt hazy and her body heavy.

Oh… she thought. *I’ve been asleep for a long, long time.* Slowly, her mind began to clear.

“Nomari!” When she finally opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was her father looking more worried than she had ever seen him before.

“Fa…ther?” She still wasn’t fully awake, and her thoughts moved at a crawl. She couldn’t speak properly yet.

Her father smiled in deep relief, put his hands on her shoulders, and sighed, sounding overcome with emotion. “Thank goodness. How do you feel?”

She wondered just what was going on. This was the first time he had ever been so emotional in front of her. Her half-asleep mind struggled to make sense of things.

“Um, fine? I was just sleeping.”

“Yes, you were—for two whole days. Are you sure you don’t feel anything wrong?”

“Whaaat?!” She did feel like her dream had been a long one, but not *that* long. It seemed as though she had slept and woken up normally. She couldn’t refrain from crying out, partly due to surprise at seeing her father so worked up for once. “Er, did I make you worry?”

“Of course,” he replied. That much was only a given, though. Despite his constantly stoic face, he was a kind man who would worry for anyone. Or at least, that was all she thought it was. His following words shocked her. “What father wouldn’t worry about his daughter?”

“…Huh? You were worried…because I’m your daughter?” she asked hesitantly.

He nodded back, looking confused. He knitted his brow, thinking hard about what to say next.

Her mind went blank when she saw him react that way. Oh, what a fool she had been. She’d put a wall between them for no reason, thinking that distance would stop him from hating her.

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…”

But he could never have hated her to begin with, could he?

She sat up and hugged him. He couldn’t react due to the sheer suddenness of it all. He, who could dodge demons with ease, was completely off guard with his daughter—with family.

Why hadn’t she realized sooner? It was so obvious. He’d opened a restaurant so the two of them could be together without anyone thinking anything was peculiar. He’d learned to cook so she would have something proper to eat. He’d even stopped wearing his beloved sword so no trouble would come her way.

Her father had always thought about what was best for her.

Her father had always strived to be good to her.

And yet, she…

“I’m so sorry, Father. I’m so sorry…”

“Nomari? What’s come over you?”

She clung to him and cried. He patted her head ever so softly.

She smiled. It was like she was a child again, but that was fine. She *was* a child, after all. His child.

She felt joy swell up inside her.

“Did you have a nightmare?” he asked.

Still in his arms, she shook her head. “No, I had a nice dream. A very nice dream…”

She smiled through tears and remembered the snowy landscape in the dream. Then she looked down and saw something by her pillow. It was one of the trinkets she’d received from Heikichi: a lovely wooden netsuke sculpture. The plump lucky sparrow almost seemed to smile at her.

Lucky sparrows were also known as winter sparrows because the birds fluffed out their plumage in winter. The cuteness of their fluffy, round bodies made them a popular subject of netsuke sculptures, papier-mâché hariko dolls, and so on. By fluffing their plumage, lucky sparrows created a layer of insulating air, keeping themselves warm in harsh cold. They endured winter this way and took to the skies once spring rolled around.

“Heikichi-san, where did you buy the gifts from?” The day after she woke up, she began asking Heikichi questions as soon as he walked into Demon Soba with Somegorou.

She had no recollection of putting the lucky sparrow netsuke sculpture by her pillow. Wondering why it would be there, she’d remembered Heikichi was an

artifact spirit user in training. Maybe his influence gave it some kind of mysterious power. She was convinced her dream had been caused by the netsuke sculpture, so she wanted to know where it came from.

“I didn’t buy ’em; they were given to me for free. I was delivering goods to a shop called Sugaya and we started talking about Demon Soba. The topic eventually turned to your father, then you. That was when the shop lady gave me all the gifts.”

“Do you know where they came from before that?”

“Sorry, I don’t.”

Nomari didn’t recall any place by the name of “Sugaya,” and Heikichi didn’t seem to know anything more, so she was left wondering just what the lucky sparrow was.

Heikichi noticed that she was lost in thought and spoke up, seemingly remembering something. “Oh, it slipped my mind, but the shop lady wanted me to wish you good luck for some reason. Not sure why, though.”

Nomari smiled broadly at those concise words of encouragement. She may not have known exactly what the lucky sparrow netsuke sculpture was, but the lady who gave it to Heikichi was most likely the young woman she saw in her dreams. The realization made her feel warm inside.

“Thank you, Heikichi. I’ll make sure to treasure this.” She lovingly held the lucky sparrow close to her heart.

Heikichi’s face reddened. It seemed like he was about to say something, but Jinya’s voice rang out first.

“Two kitsune soba, ready.”

“Coming!” she replied cheerfully, trying to slowly make up for all the communication they’d lost.

“Thanks. Don’t push yourself, though. You’ve only just recovered.”

“Oh, please. I wasn’t sick or anything. But thank you, Father.”

There wasn't a trace of stiffness between them anymore. The father showed how worried he was for his daughter's health, and the daughter—though embarrassed—accepted her overprotective father's concern. The regulars in the restaurant watched the happy father and daughter with warm eyes. Only Heikichi seemed conflicted.

"Master, why does it seem like *they've* gotten closer when *I'm* the one who gave her presents?"

"Hey, don't ask me. Good luck, though. Looks like ya got yer work cut out for ya."

"Ugh…"

Somegorou laughed as he slapped his disciple's back. Their closeness was nothing new, but now Nomari thought it was an even more heartwarming sight for some reason.

"Sorry for all the trouble, Somegorou." Once things slowed down, Jinya came out of the kitchen. He seemed refreshed, like a load had been taken off his shoulders.

"Don't worry about it. I got to see ya getting flustered, so it was all worth it."

"Please, forget everything you saw."

"Ha ha ha, it's nothin' to be ashamed about. Bein' worried just means you're a good father."

"Maybe, but I still wish you'd forget about it."

Belatedly, Nomari realized Somegorou only teased her father so much because he knew Jinya tried so hard to look strong in front of her.

"Is something wrong, Utsugi?" Jinya asked, noticing Heikichi's displeased look.

"Leave me alone," Heikichi huffed.

"Aw, don't be like that," Somegorou said. "You're making progress, don't worry."

Nomari had no clue what that meant, but it seemed significant to Heikichi.

“Go ahead and order. It’s on the house today,” Jinya said.

“Huh? Really?” Somegorou replied.

“Sure. It’s the least I can do after you helped me out.”

“I’ll take a kitsune soba, then. And I’m sure Heikichi will want his tempura soba like always.”

Nomari later learned from her father that Somegorou was the one who’d solved the problem this time. At least, sort of. He didn’t do anything special. He just told Jinya that there was nothing particularly harmful going on and he could leave Nomari be. Jinya was only half-convinced, but he followed Somegorou’s advice and cared for Nomari as she slept. She woke up two days later, and the whole incident ended without anyone doing a single thing.

“What did it turn out to be? Nomari says she had a nice dream, but that doesn’t tell us much.” Jinya folded his arms and thought hard. Nomari really didn’t have anything to add; from her perspective, she’d just slept and woken up.

“It was a mirage, not a dream.” Somegorou, who sounded like he knew what happened, spoke casually to the grim-faced Jinya. “The lucky sparrow netsuke sculpture showed her a mirage. Fate works in mysterious ways.”

“I thought it was clam artifact spirits that made mirages,” Jinya said.

“You’re right, but in Qing (China), they say sparrows dive into the sea and become clams. People saw sparrows flocking to the sea in late autumn and crafted a story around it.”

After enduring winter, lucky sparrows spread their wings for the spring. Once summer passed and autumn ended, they became clams. That being the case, it made sense that a sparrow could gain the ability to make mirages after many seasons passed.

“So the lucky sparrow managed to become a clam even after missing its

season?” Nomari asked.

“Of course. And I’m sure it wound up where it did because it believed ya could treasure its unrequited feelings,” Somegorou said happily.

“…You think so?” She smiled.

Jinya still furrowed his brow, not quite understanding. But he glanced at Nomari’s face and gave up with a sigh. He didn’t know what had happened, but if his daughter was happy, then he was willing to let it go.

“Don’t ya worry about it, Jinya. It was nothing more than a summer night mirage.” Somegorou grinned like a child who’d successfully pulled off a prank.

In the end, the young woman could not become a clam. Her feelings could not overcome the winter of endless snow. Words vanished without being spoken.

But the seasons continued to pass.

Years came and went, and eventually the lucky sparrow succeeded in becoming a clam. It found the place where it wanted to be. Those feelings that could not be expressed finally reached someone in the end. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Yeah, it’s nothing to worry about, Father. More importantly, do you want to go shopping together sometime?”

“Sure, that’d be nice.”

Nomari spoke lovingly to her father. She would try treasuring their bond more than ever. After all, that was what the young woman’s unrequited feelings wanted of her.

Nomari glanced outside through the latticed window. It was the height of summer, without a trace of snow to be found. But she knew a bit of that dream still remained inside her, and that brought her joy. She squinted slightly, blinded by the sight of the summer night mirage.

Interlude:
The Demon's Day Off

1

IT WAS MAY in year twelve of the Meiji Era (1879 AD). On Sanjyou Street, a restaurant named Demon Soba had a paper stuck to its front door:

Closed for the Day

What follows is a story of a holiday.

Morning — Masters

Even now, Jinya continued training in Sagano's bamboo grove. He'd grown more accustomed to using two swords, but his handling was still crude. He didn't want to abandon his second blade, though, so he practiced every morning without fail.

However, he had a different sparring opponent today.

"You're still much too green." Jinya stood with two blades, utterly composed. Heikichi didn't say a word back, or rather, he was too exhausted to speak.

Today's morning training was intended to help Heikichi more than Jinya. Somegorou wanted to give his disciple more experience, so he had them fight even though the gap between the two left no doubt as to the outcome.

"Well, I expected this much," Somegorou said.

Jinya had not so much as a scratch nor a single bead of sweat on him. His clothes were neat, and his breathing was normal. In contrast, Heikichi couldn't even stand. He lay sprawled on the ground, his arms and legs spread wide.

It was an inexperienced artifact spirit user against a demon with decades of

practice—this outcome was a given. Somegorou laughed as Heikichi struggled for air. This had been a good lesson for his disciple.

"Master…this man…is *inhuman*…"

"Well, yeah. He's a demon."

"You know…that's not…what I mean…"

Heikichi could control artifact spirits, but his lack of real combat experience made him no challenge. He propped himself up on the ground, sitting on the bare dirt.

"You showed a good mix of martial arts and artifact spirits, but ya lack training," Somegorou said.

"I know, damn it."

Unlike Somegorou, Heikichi focused mainly on unarmed martial arts, using his artifact spirits to compensate for his weaknesses. He may have been using this strategy to make up for his lack of an artifact spirit as powerful as Somegorou's. It wasn't a bad idea, but both his martial arts and his application of artifact spirits left something to be desired. He could fight, but it felt like he was missing a decisive method of finishing things.

"Well, what's important is gettin' an idea of where yer at. You're still in trainin', after all," Somegorou said.

"I understand, but I thought I could do better, even if I'm self-taught at martial arts. I can't believe I didn't land a single blow."

"Sorry I couldn't help ya much there. I don't know the first thing about martial arts."

"Not at all, Master! You've taught me many more important things, more than I could ever count!"

"Aw, you're so sweet I could cry." Somegorou smiled broadly. His disciple's respect didn't lessen in the slightest even though there were things he couldn't teach. Somegorou had taught more than just fighting—he'd given many

important life lessons as well. The trust between the two was strong.

“You really are fond of your master,” Jinya said.

“Of course I am! My parents were killed by demons, and the one who avenged them and took me in was none other than my master! Why wouldn’t I respect him?”

Jinya had known Heikichi for a while now, but this was the first time he’d heard about his past. Now he understood why the young man hated demons so much. It probably hurt him just to talk to one.

“I wanted the strength to kill demons myself, but, well, I guess I get that not all demons are bad now.” Embarrassed, Heikichi looked away. He went about it clumsily, but he was trying to be considerate of Jinya. Somegorou would have done it better, though. This was another area where the disciple still had some room left to grow.

“You’re a good kid, Heikichi,” Somegorou said.

“Wh-where’d that come from?”

Surely it was a bit much to call a nineteen-year-old man a kid, Jinya thought. However, he didn’t say a word as he watched the master and disciple tease one another. Somegorou spotted a slight smile rising to his lips and pointed it out with some surprise. “Oh? Well, if that ain’t a rare sight. You must be in a good mood for once.”

Jinya sighed. “I was just thinking how nice being a master and disciple must be.”

Somegorou and Heikichi’s eyes went wide. Finding that funny, Jinya gave them another slight smile.

“You dedicate yourself to one thing, spend your lifetime polishing it, then entrust what you’ve learned to someone else before passing on, thereby forming a long chain extending from the past to the future. It’s precisely because I live much longer than humans that I see something noble in all that.

Honestly, I'm even envious."

Somegorou was already elderly and would pass on one day, but *Akitsu Somegorou* would not die. The name would carry on.

Jinya once met a demon who called humans amusing. Humans lived far shorter lives, but they outlived demons because they passed things on. Humans defied their destiny as if it were their birthright. *Never has there been any greater entertainment than man,* the demon had claimed with a laugh. Jinya felt he could understand that demon's feelings now. There was something sacred in the way humans passed things down. He found himself envious, perhaps because such a thing was beyond him now.

"I don't really get it, but didn't you have a master at one point too?" Heikichi said. The words of the elderly often went over the heads of the young. Jinya knitted his brow slightly, finding Heikichi's words somewhat random. Seeing this, Heikichi elaborated, "A swordmaster, I mean. I thought you had one. You certainly look trained in the sword."

Jinya recalled Motoharu and his training with him. Calling them master and disciple would be an exaggeration, but Jinya had indeed learned the sword from him. Heikichi wasn't wrong.

Jinya closed his eyes. His thoughts went back to those distant days, transient like bubbles along a water's surface. Filled with nostalgia for his youth, he found himself talking. "The one who taught me the sword was my foster father. He trained me every day, and he was strong. I never got a hit in on him, not even once."

"…Not a single hit? Really?"

"As a demon, I cannot lie. He was the strongest swordsman in the whole village, able to kill demons in only a single strike."

"Is that right? So he was your predecessor, then."

Jinya found that phrasing a bit odd, but before he could ask for clarification,

Heikichi elaborated as though making small talk.

“People call you the swordsman who kills demons in a single strike, don’t they? Then I don’t see what you’re so envious about. You’re following in your own master’s footsteps and whatnot.”

Jinya felt his head go blank. He slowly put himself back together over the next few moments, feeling an unknown emotion swell inside him, one he couldn’t quite call joy or excitement. “Oh. Oh, I see.”

He’d thought only humans could connect the past to the future, but just as Somegorou’s techniques lived on in Heikichi, something of Motoharu remained in Jinya. Becoming a demon didn’t change that fact one bit.

Come to think of it, he’d been changed by many encounters and many partings throughout his life. Ofuu and her father Naotsugu, as well as many others, had influenced him in their own ways. Bits of them lived on in his demon self as well.

“My disciple’s not bad, eh?” Somegorou bragged. His teachings had helped Utsugi Heikichi grow into a man who could show respect for even intangible things. To think that once-cheeky brat had grown up to be so mature! Somegorou looked proud to be his master. “Just sayin’, but you can’t have him.”

“Thanks, but I didn’t want him anyway,” Jinya replied. He did envy the two a little, but not to the point of wanting Heikichi for himself or anything. Some words did come to mind, though, so he said them without hesitation. “Work hard, Utsugi. I won’t accept anyone but you as the fourth Akitsu Somegorou.”

This time it was Heikichi’s turn to be speechless. He took a second to process the words, then exhaled and turned away, seeming both unsettled and embarrassed. “…Sure.”

The meaning was clear: *You are a man worthy of the Akitsu Somegorou name.* To Heikichi, who respected his master so much, such words were the highest possible praise.

“Aha ha ha! Good for you, Heikichi. I don’t intend to pass the Akitsu Somegorou name on to anyone but you either, for what it’s worth.”

“…Thank you, Master.” Heikichi looked overwhelmed with emotion. It was hard to blame him—the master he respected had just acknowledged him as his successor.

Somegorou was not a man who made things easy, though. He grinned teasingly and said, “But you’ll have to get strong enough to beat Jinya first.”

“Huh?” Heikichi froze.

“You like Nomari-chan, don’t ya? Well, you’re going to need her father’s approval first if you want to be with her…” Somegorou glanced toward Jinya.

Jinya had known the man long enough to understand what he wanted. He didn’t mind playing along every now and then. “If you want my daughter, you’ll have to defeat me first.”

Somegorou guffawed at Jinya’s clichéd line. He was too spirited for his own good, even in his old age.

Heikichi was distraught. Jinya’s strength went beyond human capacity, he had multiple demon abilities, and he was well versed in the sword. The thought of having to defeat such a titan to marry Nomari understandably made Heikichi’s face turn pale.

“Good luck, Heikichi. You’ve got a long way to go before making Nomari-chan yours. I’m not even sure *I* could beat this guy,” Somegorou said.

“I could say the same thing,” Jinya said. “That artifact spirit—Shouki, right?—is quite something.”

“He’s my trump card. I don’t know if I could win one over you with him, but I sure wouldn’t go down without puttin’ up a good fight.”

Neither of the two were joking. Shouki could kill a superior demon in a single strike, so a direct fight against the artifact spirit sounded precarious.

Heikichi remained stunned, the conversation of the other two apparently not

registering with him.

“I think it’s a good time to finish up here. I’ll make us breakfast,” Jinya said.

“Oh, really? I’ll take you up on that. I’ll have miso soup with green onions, pretty please. Heikichi, what do you want?”

The two began walking away, leaving Heikichi behind.

After walking a few steps, Jinya turned around. The corners of his mouth curved up slightly, and he gave Heikichi a fearless stare. “I’ll be looking forward to our fight, Utsugi. Let me warn you, though: I’m pretty strong.”

Heikichi turned even more pale, a look of absolute despair on his face. “… Huh?”

Young love was often met with many trials and tribulations. That fact was true both now and in the past, and it would likely remain true for all time. But no matter the era, the final hurdle a young man must clear to be with a young woman remained the same: her father.

MiddaY — Red Bean Bread

After the training, Heikichi said he had something to attend to and excused himself. Somegorou, who’d taken up Jinya’s offer and ate breakfast at Demon Soba, was now leisurely enjoying his post-meal tea. Jinya and Nomari were chatting when Toyoshige came in.

“Hey, sorry, but I need yer help with somethin’.” The flustered man asked for their aid without a word of explanation. Their restaurants neighbored one another, so they were far from strangers. Normally Jinya would have lent a hand, but unfortunately, he was already booked for the day.

“I’m sorry, but today’s not a good day.”

“Yeah, I saw the paper on the door. You got plans?”

“I’m going on an outing with my daughter.”

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me you closed the restaurant just for that?”

“I did. Why?”

Toyoshige didn’t answer, instead making a face in response. Jinya couldn’t guess for the life of him what the big problem was. Nomari was *obviously* more important than the restaurant. What was there to be surprised about?

“Hey, how can this guy keep such a straight face sayin’ all that?” Toyoshige whispered.

“Oh, that’s just Jinya for ya. He’s not big on facial expressions,” Somegorou whispered back.

The two had never met before, but they talked to one another like close friends because they’d found common ground with their thoughts about Jinya.

“At any rate, we’re busy for the day. I can help you another time, but not today,” Jinya said.

“Oh, please, I really only need you for a moment.”

“I’m sorry, but…” Jinya was about to refuse again, but he felt Nomari tugging at his side.

She gave Toyoshige a sympathetic look. “I’m sure it’d be okay to help out a little bit, right, Father?”

She was kind enough to postpone their outing together to help her neighbor out. But his daughter’s sweetness was exactly why Jinya didn’t want to ruin the outing she’d been looking forward to so much.

As if reading his thoughts, she smiled gently and said, “Mihashi-san is always helping us out, isn’t he? Let’s hear what he wants first, then decide what we’ll do. We owe him that much.”

“Well… All right.” Jinya relented. He knew she used to avoid speaking out like this because she feared he’d hate her for it. Children really did grow up fast.

Proud of her maturity, he felt a smile bubbling up. “Well then, what do you need, Mihashi-san?”

“You’re making new sweets?”

“Yes, sir. It’s usually too much of a bother, but sales haven’t been all that good lately. I gotta put in some real effort, or I’ll really be in for it later.”

Saku, Toyoshige’s wife, was a strong-willed woman. The two were a loving couple, but she was clearly the dominant one in the relationship. Their shop, Mihashiya, didn’t have many customers yet, which probably caused Saku a lot of worry.

“But I don’t see how I can help,” Jinya said. He knew how to make soba and handle home cooking, but he’d never made sweets before. There wasn’t much, if anything, he could do for the man.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” Toyoshige said. “And I could use Nomari-chan’s help too.”

“Huh? Me? But my cooking is nothing special,” Nomari said, a little surprised. She’d only recently started practicing the basics of cooking; Jinya was much better than her.

Toyoshige laughed. “No, no, that ain’t the kind of help I had in mind. I was hopin’ you two could be taste testers for me.” He wanted them to taste finished products, not help make them, so experience creating sweets wouldn’t be needed.

“Oh, if that’s all, then I can definitely help,” Nomari said, relieved her cooking ability wouldn’t be put to the test.

“Great! And you?” Toyoshige looked expectantly at Jinya.

Now that his daughter had accepted, Jinya certainly couldn’t say no. “I don’t mind either.”

“Thank you both so much. I’ve actually already got an idea of what I want to

make.”

“Oh?”

Toyoshige acted pretty disinterested in the whole affair, as if his wife had forced his hand, but he might actually have been more motivated than he let on. With all eyes on him, he proudly said, “I’m going to make red bean bread.” His grin made him look rather confident.

Jinya cocked his head to the side, not familiar with any sweet by that name. Toyoshige took the opportunity to launch into a heated explanation.

“Red bean bread is a sweet that a confectionery place in Ginza, Tokyo came up with. Apparently, it’s so popular they even deliver it to the emperor. Have ya ever heard of it?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Is that so? Well, no matter.” Toyoshige’s explanation stopped there. Confused, Jinya urged him to continue, but the man just frowned and said, “Er… That’s everything.” A bit more strongly, he added, “Look, red bean bread is popular right now, which means they’ll sell even if I don’t put any kind of spin on ’em.”

In other words, he planned to be a shameless copycat. He sounded really confident in the idea, but it was hard to be as enthusiastic as he was.

“Hey, Jinya,” Somegorou spoke up. “I think I know why this guy’s store ain’t doing so well…”

“What a coincidence. I think I just figured out why myself.”

Somegorou, Jinya, and Nomari shared exasperated looks, but Toyoshige didn’t seem to mind. He was utterly convinced his idea was a stroke of genius.

“Yes, yes, I know I’ve outdone myself. The only problem is that I’m not sure how to make this red bean bread stuff. Never even seen it for myself, actually,” he said.

“Wow, things got *worse*,” Somegorou said. Toyoshige promptly ignored him.

Jinya wondered just how Toyoshige was supposed to make something he'd never even seen before, but then he realized why the man was asking for their help. "…Mihashi-san, correct me if I'm wrong, but when you say you want us to help with taste testing…"

"You got it! I ain't got a clue what red bean bread is supposed to taste like, so I'll just make stuff until you guys say it's about right."

"But we don't know what red bean bread is supposed to taste like."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. Just pick what *feels* the most like what red bean bread should be."

Toyoshige's plan only grew more and more nonsensical. At any rate, the man started cooking.

"Here ya go, first batch." Toyoshige set out some small, round brown sweets. They were small enough to eat in one bite and were still steaming slightly because they were freshly baked. "From what I've managed to gather, red bean bread is made by taking wheat dough and stuffing it with red bean paste. Let me know what you think."

Jinya, Nomari, and Somegorou each took a piece and bit into it. They chewed slowly, tasting the subdued sweetness of red adzuki beans and the faint flavor of the dough.

"Isn't this just manju?" they all said in unison. The food Toyoshige had served really did seem identical to manju.

"The dough doesn't taste that great…" Nomari said, making a slight face. She was fond of sweet things, so her appraisal was harsher than Jinya and Somegorou's.

"I-I see. Shoot, and I was so sure about this one too… Oh well. Next batch." Toyoshige quickly brought over more sweets from his store. This time it was a rather strange creation. The sweets were round, but they were wrapped in

layers of some string-like thing. It certainly did not whet one's appetite.

"…Mihashi-san, what is this?" Jinya asked.

"All right, so the dough uses wheat, right? And that got me thinking: What else uses wheat? Somen noodles! So I tried making red bean bread with them as the bun."

"I assume it's filled with red adzuki bean paste?"

"That it is," Toyoshige answered unwaveringly, crossing his arms. He seemed overflowing with confidence in his work.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't want to eat adzuki-flavored noodles," Jinya said.

"Yeah, I kinda figured you wouldn't."

Then why even bring it over? Jinya couldn't help but wonder.

"Mm, yeah, this ain't it." Somegorou gave his honest thoughts after trying one out.

Jinya sighed in exasperation. If they kept entertaining Toyoshige's wild ideas, their taste-testing session would go on forever. Jinya had his outing with Nomari waiting for him, so he had to put an end to this quickly. Keeping that in mind, he said, "Red bean bread is just wheat dough stuffed with red bean paste, correct?"

"That's about right, yeah."

"Then isn't it a lot like kintsuba?"

Kintsuba, also known as kintsubayaki, was made by kneading wheat flour with water and stretching it thin, then filling the resulting thin dough with red bean paste. If red bean bread was really just wheat dough stuffed with red bean paste, then the two should be pretty similar.

"Oh, kintsuba, huh? I see what you're sayin', but I've heard red bean bread is a kind of bun, meaning you can't see the red bean paste from the outside," Toyoshige said.

“How about trying out kintsuba dough, but thicker?”

“Eh, I kinda doubt that’d sell. Kintsuba dough is only good because it’s thin.”

Red bean bread and kintsuba seemed to be entirely different sweets. And now that he thought about it, Jinya had to admit that biting through a thick slice of wheat flour dough didn’t sound all that appealing. That only left imitating manju or some other sweet. He ran his mind through all the sweets he knew, but nothing felt right.

“But I think you’re on to somethin’, Jinya. Using existing sweets as a basis is a good idea. Give me a second, let me try somethin’.” Toyoshige left the restaurant in high spirits. Jinya’s idea seemed to have sparked a brainstorm of his own, and he returned not long after. “I tried making ’em dango-style.”

“Not bad,” Jinya said.

“Yeah. They have a nice springy texture and taste good,” Nomari agreed.

Toyoshige brought over new sweets with ingenious twists one after another. He was skilled enough that his experiments were all fairly decent, worthy of being sold at a regular confectionery store.

“Since they’re wheat and all, I tried bakin’ these for a nice fragrance,” Toyoshige said.

“I’m guessing you kneaded the wheat dough with water first?” Jinya asked.

“Hey, this is pretty good. But you can probably only eat it fresh…” Somegorou said.

They continued trying out different sweets, still none the wiser about what exactly red bean bread was supposed to be.

“I think I’ve had enough. This is a bit much for an old man like me.” Somegorou was the first to throw in the towel. His stomach ached from overeating, so he borrowed Jinya’s living room to lie down. Jinya himself was nearing his limit.

“What about you, Father?” Nomari asked.

“I can still eat,” Jinya answered. He didn’t hate sweets, he was even fond of some kinds, but eating *this* much was tough. Nomari still looked fine, perhaps because she was a young girl. Girls could be a bottomless pit when it came to sweets.

“Thanks for having the patience to stick with me this far. But this time, I’m pulling out all the stops!” Toyoshige walked in carrying more sweets. This time it was a circular type with yellow dough. He seemed particularly satisfied with his work this time around, and there was a wide grin on his face.

“It’s wheat dough again, but this time I added plenty of egg and mizuame syrup and baked it until it was soft. It should be pretty good.”

“Is that so…?” Jinya’s expression was stiff. The sweets *did* look good, but he had eaten too much already. The sweet smell alone made him hesitate.

“Ugh, I’ll pass.” Somegorou didn’t even look over.

Jinya wanted to turn it down as well, but he’d promised he would help. For his own pride’s sake, he would see things through. He forced himself to pick up the sweet, then ate it.

“Hmm…” The mouthfeel was good. The wheat dough was fluffier than any of the earlier attempts, likely thanks to the egg and mizuame syrup. The red bean paste inside had a mild sweetness that left a pleasant aftertaste.

“It’s good,” he said. He wasn’t even trying to critique the food; the words just came out naturally.

Nomari tried one as well. One look at her face made her opinion clear.

With expectant eyes, Toyoshige said, “W-well? What do you think, Nomari-san?”

“It’s good. Yeah, this is the best one so far.”

Overcome with emotion, Toyoshige trembled.

Nomari continued to eat, seeming quite taken with the sweet. Her happy face

put a thought in Jinya's head, and the corners of his mouth curved into a smile. "Mihashi-san, this is probably it."

Toyoshige seemed to have the same idea. A bold smile was already on his face. In a whisper, he said, "I see. So this…"

Jinya nodded and finished the other man's words. "…is red bean bread."

"Wow…"

"Yeah…"

Of course, they were completely off the mark. Wheat flour baked with egg and mizuame syrup made castella, not bread. It was a long, long way off from red bean bread, not that anyone there knew the truth and could correct them.

Nomari nodded along with what the two adults said, also unaware of the truth.

"Thank you, Kadono-san and Nomari-chan. And you too, old man lying down over there. Thanks to you guys, I managed to make red bean bread!" Toyoshige's eyes moistened with tears, oblivious to the fact that he was flat-out wrong.

Jinya had only helped with taste-testing, but that alone had been hard work. He felt like his efforts had paid off too. He patted Toyoshige on the shoulder and said, "Don't be so humble. This was all you, Mihashi-san. Be proud."

"Yeah. Congratulations, Mihashi-san." Nomari praised Toyoshige as well.

To reiterate, what he'd made was *completely* unrelated to red bean bread.

"No, I couldn't have done this alone. Oh, by the way, can y'all help me out with one more thing?" He bashfully scratched his cheek.

Happy about their success, Jinya gave a gentle look and nodded. "Of course."

"I want your help naming this since we all worked together. Could ya come up with a name, Kadono-san?"

"Oh, I see… Let me think."

It was probably the uplifted mood that made Jinya act so uncharacteristically. He ignored his better judgment and named the new sweet…

***

August 2009.

Fast forward in time to the modern age.

Kadono Jinya, Azusaya Kaoru, and Miyaka sat around a table in Miyaka's home, which was on the grounds of the Jinta Shrine in Kadono City.

The date was August 25th. Summer vacation would be ending soon, and the three had gathered in Miyaka's room that morning to finish their summer homework.

"How's it going, Jin-kun?"

"Not terrible. I just can't wrap my head around English, though."

"I'll help you with it if you help me with classical Japanese."

"Sure. I've read most of the original texts anyway."

"Aha ha, I should've known!"

With a wondering look in her eyes, Miyaka watched her two friends chat. Their summer vacation had been an eventful one. They'd gone to the beach, seen a festival, had a girls-only shopping trip, got the usual classmates together to mess around near the station, and more. Oh, and of course, all that occult stuff had happened.

With all those experiences in hand, it wasn't startling that Miyaka had grown closer not only to Jinya but to many of her classmates as well. By extension, it shouldn't have been at all surprising that Kaoru and Jinya would grow closer too—but close enough for her to suddenly start calling him by a nickname, "Jin-kun"?

"Hey, Asagao…"

"Sure, let me have a look."

Jinya had always been awfully soft when it came to Kaoru, but lately it seemed like the distance between them had shrunk even more. He actually had his own nickname for her, “Asagao,” which didn’t even make sense. How was “Asagao” supposed to be a nickname for “Kaoru”? Kaoru didn’t seem to mind being called that, though. Just what had happened between the two?

Miyaka continued to stare until Jinya suddenly lifted his face and met her eyes. They locked gazes for a few moments. Then, completely unfazed, he asked, “What’s wrong? You’re not working on your homework.”

And whose fault do you think it is that I’m distracted? Miyaka thought. She considered saying it out loud but decided otherwise since it was a bit unreasonable.

“Bleh.” Irritated at his composure, she tossed her eraser at him.

“What are you doing?”

It hit his head with a *thunk*. He didn’t even try to dodge or block it. Feeling like she was being treated like a child, she got even more irritated.

“I’m done! Whew.” Kaoru tossed her mechanical pencil onto the table and stretched herself out. Jinya heaved a deep sigh as well.

“I just finished too.” Now that Miyaka was also done, the three could finally put their homework away.

They at last had a moment to breathe. Miyaka suddenly remembered that her mother had made some sweets for them.

“Ugh, I’m exhausted. But at least now we can finally have some fun without worrying about homework,” Kaoru said.

“Yeah. Wait here for a sec; I’m going to get us some tea.” Miyaka went to the kitchen and got some green tea and snacks, which she put on a tray. She returned to find Kaoru in full-on lazy mode and Jinya watching her with a heartwarming smile. The two were close, no doubt, but they were more like siblings than sweethearts. Or rather, more like grandpa and grandchild given

their ages.

“Oh, welcome back.”

“Kaoru, don’t just laze on the floor like that. It’s messy, and you have guests.”

“But I’m tiiiireeeed.”

Despite their closeness, Kaoru didn’t seem to see Jinya as a member of the opposite sex. Or maybe she just didn’t care enough. She rolled around on the ground in a skirt and didn’t stop even when Miyaka chided her. *Seriously? What if your underwear showed?*

Miyaka put the tray on the table and quickly pulled Kaoru up. “Anyway, my mom went on a trip to Kyoto and brought back some sweets. These are apparently called Nomari red bean bread, from a place named Mihashiya.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of these! They were talking about ’em on TV!” Kaoru smiled broadly. She had a thing for sweets.

In contrast, the folds in Jinya’s brow grew deeper than usual.

“What’s up? Don’t you like these kinds of sweets?” Miyaka asked.

“No, it’s not that…” Jinya said.

When they’d had tea earlier, he’d told her how sugar used to be really valuable, so he rarely got to eat sweets. That was why he ate cake whenever he could now. She’d thought he’d be fine with whatever sweets he could get, but his expression was uncharacteristically cloudy.

Miyaka was curious, but she shrugged it off and got the snacks and tea ready. “Go ahead and eat.”

“Don’t mind if I do!” Kaoru energetically stuffed her cheeks.

Nomari red bean bread was a famous sweet from a Kyoto confectionery known as Mihashiya. It used castella dough to wrap a red bean paste filling. The fluffy dough paired well with the adzuki beans, so it was no wonder it was popular.

“Mmm, delish,” Kaoru said.

“Yeah. But this isn’t really red bean bread, is it?” Miyaka said. *Forget that, this isn’t even bread. So what’s with the name?*

Unexpectedly, Jinya spoke up and gave his two cents. “It uses wheat dough and red bean paste. Isn’t that close enough to call it red bean bread?”

“That’s a real stretch…” Miyaka replied without thinking much about it. For some reason, that made Jinya grimace hard as he bit into a piece.

Kaoru seemed to realize something when she saw his face. Hesitantly, she asked, “Hey, Jin-kun… Wasn’t Mihashiya the name of the confectionery next to the place you lived a long time ago?”

“Huh? Jinya, you lived in Kyoto?” Miyaka asked.

“I did, for a while.”

That was news to Miyaka. But then again, she never probed into his past much because she didn’t want to be rude. On the other hand, Kaoru sat next to him in class and was the type to fire off whatever question came to mind. He was pretty soft on her, so he would probably answer any question she had. They must have talked a lot about his past.

Kaoru said, “Wait, could this red bean bread be named after…?”

“Don’t say it,” Jinya said. The topic seemed like something he wanted to avoid, though Miyaka didn’t understand why. His voice was stern but also weary.

“I mean, why else would it be called ‘Nomari’ red bean bread?” Kaoru said.

“Please, spare me…” He looked down dejectedly.

A moment of exaltation could lead to lifelong embarrassment. Nobody could have predicted that the sweets made by chance that day would live on for more than a hundred years. Under the knowing gaze of Kaoru and the confused stare of Miyaka, Jinya could only hang his head in shame.

2

Evening — The Ribbon

THEY TOOK THEIR TIME as they strolled down Sanjyou Street. Jinya had left his swords behind. He was still unused to the missing weight on his hip, but his heart felt light. The usual din of the street came across as comforting now.

Making red bean bread had taken longer than expected, and it was already evening. An orange glow filled the cloudless sky, bringing to mind a calm sea with unstirring waves—an evening lull. This was Yuunagi's sky. Perhaps being delayed had actually been a blessing in disguise.

"Is something wrong, Father?" Yuunagi's flower swayed in the wind.

Nomari had insisted they visit the kimono fabric store together on their outing. They hadn't gone often when she was a child and didn't go at all these days, so he was a bit surprised by the request.

"Sorry, I blanked out a bit. Now, what do you want to buy?"

"Um, a ribbon. I want you to buy me a ribbon." She smiled bashfully. Even as a child, she'd never asked for much. She probably held back a lot because they weren't related by blood. He was happy to see she could now be up-front about things she wanted.

"Which one do you want?"

"I want you to pick for me. Could you?" She cocked her head and looked at him with upturned eyes. A long time ago, back when the candy-apple heavenly maiden was staying with them, Jinya had bought her the pink ribbon she still wore today. He remembered Nomari had asked him to pick out a yukata robe for her back then.

"That brings back memories. You asked the same thing last time."

"You remembered." The flower bloomed wide.

Her low murmur was tinged with joy. She apparently recalled the moment as

well. Perhaps she had asked to come here specifically because she treasured the memory, even asking him to pick for her again. In that case, there was only one choice he could make.

“Let’s get a pink ribbon, then.”

Nomari smiled brilliantly. It seemed he’d made the right choice, and he had an idea where she wanted to go next.

“Excuse me, we’ll take this,” he called out to a store employee, who packed the ribbon for them.

The store employee, a short man, made a businesslike smile and treated the two like a couple.

Jinya’s thoughts came to a halt. He was fifty-seven now, but his appearance was still that of an eighteen-year-old. Now that Nomari was sixteen, they did not look like father and daughter.

He knew things would eventually come to this. It was inevitable that one day Nomari would grow up and even outwardly overtake him in age. But now that reality was unfolding before him, he couldn’t do anything but freeze in place. He could no longer ignore that the time when he could be her father was coming to an end.

“Should we go, Father?” She hugged his arm and smiled, making time move for him again.

“Nomari…”

“There’s one more place I want to visit.”

She was still hugging his arm as they took their purchase from the now bug-eyed employee and left the store.

He felt the warmth of her hands and keenly sensed how big and kind his daughter had grown. He felt proud he’d raised such a considerate daughter, even if she did look a bit embarrassed clinging to him like this. There was a sadness underneath it all, though. With a complicated mix of emotions, he

looked at her face from the side.

A shining beam of evening light blurred his vision.

There was once a time when she'd needed to hold his hand to walk, but she was old enough to walk on her own now. A time when she'd no longer need him was coming, and it would likely be sooner than later.

"Oh, Kadono-san?"

They encountered an elderly man at the Aragi Inari Shrine: Kunieda Koudai, the shrine's chief priest and a close acquaintance after some earlier events.

"Hello, Kunieda-dono. It's been a while," Jinya said.

"That it has. It's strange we don't see much of one another even though we're sharin' the same town. You should show your face every now and then. I'm sure Chiyo would like that too."

Chiyo was his wife, whom Jinya knew fairly well because they were from the same hometown. It was strange to think that the little girl he once knew was now an elderly woman.

"What brings you here today?" Koudai asked.

"We're just stopping by out of nostalgia," Nomari answered before Jinya could. Her voice did sound nostalgic, but a little stiff as well.

Sensing something, Koudai smiled and gave the two a long look before nodding. "I see. Let me leave you both to it, then."

"Thank you. It was nice seeing you again," Jinya said.

"The pleasure was all mine. Please, take your time." Koudai briskly left the shrine grounds.

The leaves of the trees murmured in the wind, and a shadow began to encroach on the sky of the evening lull. It would not be long before night fell.

Nomari let Jinya's arm go and took three big steps forward. She turned her

back to the evening sun that was sinking behind her. The two stood there and stared at one another.

Their silhouettes stretched out, and the wind caressed their cheeks. Everything was bathed in an evening glow, all things blurring into indistinct shapes.

Nomari suddenly took something out of the inner folds of her clothes: a netsuke sculpture of a lovely, plump lucky sparrow. She held it tightly with both hands and met Jinya's eyes directly.

"Thanks for indulging in my whims today, Father."

"Not at all. I had a good day too."

"Glad to hear it. Being mistaken for a couple was a bit embarrassing, though." Despite her indifferent tone, his heart ached. Her lips curled softly as she added, "We'll be the same age soon, huh?" Her smile was a sad one, pained and lonely. "People probably won't see us as parent and child anymore from now on. That's why I wanted you to indulge me today, so we could spend time like father and daughter."

Nomari also knew that what they had together was reaching a close. They were human and demon, unable to age in the same way. They'd both known an end would come one day. "Hey, Father? Could you tie this for me?"

"…Of course."

She undid her hair ribbon, letting her hair flow with the breeze. He drew close and tied her hair with the new pink ribbon. When she was a child, he'd done this many times, but at some point, she learned to tie it herself. It had been a long while since he'd done it for her.

"Nothing that exists is changeless." Distant words flitted through his mind.

After tying the ribbon, he realized what this was all about. She was marking a turning point. From this point forward, something different would begin between them.

“I see. Then it was my stubborn, unwilling-to-change self who dumped me.” He recalled a parting that had taken place under a similar evening sky.

He squinted slightly. Surely it was just the evening sun’s brilliance that was disorienting him.

“I know all about how hard you’ve worked to be my father. You opened a soba restaurant just so I wouldn’t stand out in school, didn’t you?” she said.

As far as money was concerned, they would’ve been fine with his demon-hunting work alone. But socially, that was no different than him being unemployed. That was why he began a soba restaurant—so his daughter could go to elementary school without having to feel ashamed.

“You’ve stopped wearing swords around for my sake too, huh? You didn’t want to get in trouble with the authorities and make me worry. You’re always keeping me in mind.”

She had a distant look in her eyes. He couldn’t guess what she saw. He couldn’t even say a word, not when she was suddenly acting so mature. But he did think one thing: His daughter was no longer the small child she used to be. She was strong enough to walk on her own now. He felt he could accept whatever path she chose to take, even if he was not part of it.

“This time, it’s my turn to look after you.” She smiled unbelievably softly as she spoke words he hadn’t expected. Quietly but firmly, she said, “I’ll say again what I said long ago… I will become your mother, Father.” Her sunny smile was a mismatch for the evening skies. “I’m still younger than you right now, so I’m more of a younger sister at this point. But I’ll be your older sister soon, and then once I’m even older, I’ll become your mother for real and spoil you a whole bunch. I’ll pat your head and all that.” She took a joking tone, but his heart was touched. Her words were full of warm, warm love.

“I’ve been spoiled all this time,” she continued. “I’ve taken it for granted that we’ve been family. But it’s not that simple, is it?” Fully aware that those with different life spans could not stay together forever, she continued, “The two of

us could stay a family because you worked hard to make us one. That's why it's my turn now. I'll be the one to work hard to keep us a family. I won't be able to live as long as you, and one day I'll leave you behind in this world…"

The evening sun illuminated her face. An orange glow filled the tears in her eyes, which were locked onto their inevitable parting. But for now…

"…But will you still be my family anyway?"

For now, Nomari still wanted to stay by his side.

She extended a hand. He was stunned. The sight of her illuminated in the evening glow made time seem to lose meaning for a moment. This might have been the first time he'd been so captivated by the sight of her.

"Nomari…"

"Heh heh. It looks like I've learned to be a little more honest." Her other hand firmly held the lucky sparrow. Her smile was graceful and soft, and dazzling enough to make him catch his breath.

"It feels like I was changing your diapers just yesterday," he said.

"I've grown, huh? Now *I* can be the one to spoil *you* rotten."

"I'm not so sure about that. I'm not giving up being your father just yet."

"Heh, yeah. Yeah, I think I'd like to stay as your daughter just a little longer too."

She nestled up to his side, her pink ribbon fluttering in the breeze. The sky of the evening lull was beginning to take on a light-purple hue. Night was slowly encroaching. He looked up and saw stars twinkling now and then.

"You still haven't answered me, Father."

"Do I even need to say it?"

"Maybe not, but I want to hear it." It was hard to say whether she had grown more honest with herself or just more assertive. She smiled a bit impishly, pressing him to answer.

With his eyes still focused on the sky, he relented and answered. “I want us to stay a family too.” Even without looking, he knew a smile had bloomed on her face like a flower.

“Good.”

The two stayed like that for a while, watching the stars as they nestled together.

He knew they would part one day, but that only made him hold her tiny hand even more tightly now.

Night — The End

“Uncle and Nomari-chan sure get along well. It’s a little irritating.”

In a room of a dilapidated estate somewhere, Himawari puffed out her cheeks indignantly. Her eyes were closed while she used her ability to see distant sights.

Himawari was Magatsume’s eldest daughter. She was the part Magatsume had discarded first, the part she needed to rid herself of in order to oppose her brother. Hence, out of all the sisters, Himawari was the closest to what had once been known as Suzune.

“Do you see them too, Mother?” she asked. Hugging her tightly from behind was a demon woman wearing black. Her soft, flowing blonde hair looked enchantingly beautiful in the dark.

The demon woman, Himawari’s mother, did not answer the question. Instead, she cursed in a voice gloomier than dusk, **“… How dare you…”**

Her murmur faded softly into the night.

Walking with You

1

I still remember the days I spent with you.

IT WAS NOW NOVEMBER in year fourteen of the Meiji era (1881 AD).

The wind brushing his cheeks made him tremble. The seasons had changed hands, and the stars shining clear in the sky now felt keenly of winter. The open air was so cold his skin hurt. The winter wind cried shrilly as it blew, cutting like a sharp razor.

If one strayed from the main streets of neat and orderly Kyoto, they would soon find numerous back alleys. These alleys were shadowy enough during the day, but by nightfall they became truly lightless—and since time immemorial, spirits have loved nothing more than to make such lightless zones their haunting grounds.

Under night's wintry curtain, a groan could be heard.

A man and a grotesque demon stood in an alley. The demon glared at the man, but the man showed no fear, instead scratching his head and looking bored. Though incapable of speech, the demon could certainly feel insulted. Entering a rage and sprinting forth, it closed the distance quickly with its powerful legs moving at inhuman speed. But even at that, the man remained unfazed.

"Just a lesser demon, eh?" He lowered his hips and shifted his weight onto his left leg, stepping forward with it right as the demon approached. His feet dug firmly into the ground as he twisted his body, sending energy from his feet to his legs, then his hips, torso, shoulders, and finally his arms. "You move at a snail's pace compared to that soba guy."

His fist hit the demon squarely in the jaw, hard enough to lift it off its feet. A human would've been killed instantly, but a demon—even a lesser one—wouldn't fold so quickly. Thus, the man prepared his next strike.

"Skulls." On the man's left wrist were three prayer beads made of cassia tree wood. Engraved on them was the image of arhats—monks who'd reached enlightenment. He extended his arm, and a skull burst forth from his hand. It rushed toward the demon, teeth clattering, and was soon followed by a few more skulls that engulfed the demon like an avalanche. The skulls bore similar engravings to the prayer beads.

The skulls bit into the demon. With no throats to travel down, its flesh spilled onto the ground. Blood sprayed, painting the skulls red. The demon was helpless, and a white vapor began to rise from it.

The man gave a bored expression as he watched the demon's corpse fade away. After a few moments, the demon fully faded into the winter air, together with the skulls. Only after confirming it was over did the man—Utsugi Heikichi—fix his clothes.

"…Hmph. This feels wrong." Though he'd killed one of the demons he so loathed, he felt like there was a fog over his heart. The winter wind seemed even harsher than usual.

"Thanks for the help, Utsugi-san."

Heikichi stepped out of the alley and was greeted by a wealthy-looking man with broad shoulders. He was a store owner, as well as the client for this demon-hunting job Heikichi had undertaken. There had been a number of demon sightings in the alley near the man's store, so he went to Akitsu Somegorou for help. Somegorou declined the job, though, so Heikichi took it on instead.

Somegorou turned the job down because the demon in question hadn't hurt anyone. The store owner insisted that having a demon nearby was automatically a cause for worry, but that rubbed Somegorou the wrong way.

Killing a demon that had done no wrong went against the values of Akitsu Somegorou the Third. There were both virtuous and wicked personalities among demons—simply existing as a demon did not warrant death to him.

But Heikichi was different. He loathed demons and could sympathize with the store owner, so he accepted the job.

“I can’t believe you made such quick work of the demon. I guess you ain’t Akitsu’s disciple for nothin’.” The store owner let out a deep sigh.

Seeing the man look so relieved took away some of the load weighing on Heikichi’s shoulders. Heikichi knew full well that there were upright folk among demons; the demon he’d just killed might have been one of them. His master’s teachings were not wrong. Still, it remained a fact that the mere presence of demons worried people. In front of him now was someone happy to know the world had been rid of a demon. Therefore, while acknowledging the truth in his master’s words, Heikichi still believed in the validity of his own ways.

“Say, maybe you’re already better than your master?” the store owner said.

“No way. I can’t even hold a candle to him,” Heikichi replied. More quietly, he added, “I can’t even beat a dang soba restaurant owner, for crying out loud…”

“Pardon?” The store owner missed Heikichi’s muttered words.

In truth, Heikichi was a fairly skilled demon hunter. For a man at the young age of twenty-one, his combined usage of artifact spirits and martial arts was well polished. He simply had the misfortune of having two outliers close by to serve as his reference points.

His artifact spirits remained nowhere near the quality of his master’s, and his martial arts could barely lay a scratch on Jinya. Because of those two, Heikichi didn’t dare call himself strong.

“Oh, nothin’. Anyway, I’ll be going now that the job’s done.” After taking his payment, Heikichi hurriedly started to leave. But before he could even begin walking, the store owner called out to him.

“Wait, hold on one second.”

“Yes?”

“Well, er, since you’re so strong, I might have another job for ya.”

“Is that so…?” Heikichi said, not too thrilled.

The store owner ignored Heikichi’s tone and soberly said, “Heikichi-san… Have you heard of the Shrine Maiden of Healing?”

***

“But ya know, I just can’t help but be a little bummed out.” Somegorou downed his cup and let out a sigh.

It was late at night. Jinya and Somegorou were pouring drinks for one another at Demon Soba. Somegorou turned fifty-four this year, but he was still a strong drinker despite his old age. He could even match Jinya, who was practically bottomless. The table was already littered with more than ten empty decanter bottles.

“I mean, ’course I’m happy my disciple’s grown up and all, but seein’ him not need any help with anythin’ anymore is kind of…yeah.”

Tonight, Heikichi was demon hunting alone. Somegorou approved of his skills enough to let him fly solo, but there were still some emotional hang-ups involved. Heikichi had been a handful of a disciple, and it was bewildering to see him stand on his own two feet.

“Heikichi can think and act for himself now. I’m proud, but also kind of sad,” Somegorou said.

“I think I get it,” Jinya said after downing a cup. “Like you said, you’re happy he’s grown but sad he doesn’t need you anymore.”

“Ah, yeah, that’s it. You’ve been through the same thing with Nomari-chan?”

“I have. Being a parent is tough.”

Nomari was eighteen now. Seeing her grow from a child to an adult already

made Somegorou emotional, so it had to have an even bigger effect on Jinya, her father. There was joy in recognizing your daughter's growth, but sadness in knowing your duty as a parent was done. Somegorou could relate to Jinya there.

"Y'know, I think I understand your struggles a bit more now. All right, let's drink the night and our worries away!"

"Oh no you don't." A woman's voice interrupted them. Her hair came down to her shoulders and was tied with a pink ribbon. She put the empty decanter bottles onto a tray and sternly chided the two men with a smile. "Late-night drinking is bad for you. Make this the last one."

"I'm sure a little more wouldn't hurt," Jinya said.

"No means no. Don't you have to run the restaurant tomorrow?" She didn't budge even for her father. She'd been a little daddy's girl when she was young, but now she could be firm with him. Somegorou found it hard to believe.

"You've gotten awfully assertive, Nomari-chan," he said.

"But of course. A mother has to be firm, after all," she replied.

Confused, Somegorou looked to Jinya for an explanation. The corners of Jinya's mouth curled into a smile as he shrugged and said, "My daughter says she's going to be my mother." He then downed a cup.

"What?" Somegorou said, baffled.

"She and I have become the same age. Other people won't see her as my daughter anymore. We look like siblings the way we are now—or maybe even a couple."

Somegorou was still baffled by what he was hearing, but then another voice spoke up.

"Interesting. As your legal wife, should I allow a lover or two knowing you will come back to me, or be firm and not allow you to stray? What a conundrum." The sword atop the table, Yatonomori Kaneomi, spoke despite her lack of a

mouth. Perhaps she, Jinya's self-proclaimed wife, had her own thoughts about what Nomari had said.

"You're still going on about that?" Jinya chided her.

"I don't see how it inconveniences you."

"Then you must be blind."

Nomari watched the two bicker, a pleasant smile on her face. The three made for an odd trio—a human, a demon, and a sword.

Somegorou felt exhausted watching the three and sighed, saying, "Somebody's popular…"

That said, he wasn't particularly jealous of Jinya. Jinya may have been surrounded by women, but one was his daughter and the other was a sword. There wasn't much to be jealous of.

"I have no clue what's going on, but let's drink."

This kind of silly banter paired well with liquor. Somegorou poured himself a drink and downed it in one go. The warmth gliding down his throat put a smile on his face.

***

The day after he defeated the demon so easily, Heikichi went to Demon Soba for a late lunch. He planned to splurge on his meal a bit with the money he got from the job, but habits were a hard thing to break. Despite his intentions, he automatically ordered his usual tempura soba the moment he passed under the restaurant's entrance curtains.

Nomari struck up a conversation with him. "Heikichi-san, I heard you had a job last night," she said. There were only a few other customers, but she spoke in a whisper anyway for his sake.

"Oh, yeah. Nothing that'd give me trouble, though."

"Is that so? Looks like your training is paying off, then." She flashed him a

dazzling smile, showing that she saw and recognized his efforts. He felt his face heat up.

“O-oh, maybe. Aha ha ha.” His reply came out awkwardly. He was twenty-one years old already, but he still tripped over his words when he talked to his crush—doubly so whenever she smiled. He tried to think of something smooth to say, but a new customer walked in just then.

She nodded apologetically and left to serve the customer, greeting them cheerfully. “Welcome!”

Heikichi ever so slightly reached a hand toward her as she left, but that was all he could manage. He was still too weak-willed a man to work up meaningful courage. Dejected, he sagged his shoulders.

“How did yesterday go?” Jinya, having finished making soba for the latest customer, appeared to chat Heikichi up in Nomari’s place.

“Do you even need to ask? I didn’t break a sweat. Honestly, just about every demon is small fry compared to you.” Heikichi’s tone turned casual and rough, a complete turnaround from his earlier embarrassing display with Nomari. He didn’t speak that way because he was hostile toward Jinya, though. Far from it. Heikichi would never admit it, but he was thankful to the man.

As Somegorou did not know martial arts, Heikichi had to learn them from Jinya instead. Jinya was mainly skilled in the sword and only called himself passable when it came to bare-handed combat. But, as it turned out, Jinya’s “passable” was still exceptional by Heikichi’s standards. After training with Jinya, defeating lesser demons became a breeze. And so, Heikichi owed his fighting ability not just to Somegorou but to Jinya as well.

“You overestimate me. There are many demons stronger than me out there,” Jinya said.

“For real?”

“I know of two myself. It was a long time ago now, but I once fought a mere

lesser demon who was far greater with the sword than me. Then there's Magatsume."

Heikichi couldn't believe what he was hearing, but demons couldn't lie and Jinya wasn't the type to make jokes, so he had no choice but to accept it as the truth. As far as Heikichi was concerned, Jinya was a monster in terms of strength, so hearing there were even more powerful demons made him gulp. With a serious look, he said, "I better not slack on my training, then."

Jinya replied with an equally stern expression. "Good. Don't rest on your laurels. As I've said before, I won't accept anyone but you as the fourth Akitsu Somegorou."

Hearing those words had made Heikichi ecstatic before, but now he hung his head in dejection.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just… Am I really fit to be the next Akitsu Somegorou?" Heikichi was surprised by how weak he sounded. He didn't loathe demons as much as he used to, but he certainly hadn't thought he would ever share his worries with one. "My master says there are both virtuous and wicked demons, so you shouldn't kill one that's done no wrong. But…as awful as it is to say this right in front of you, I think it's even worse to spare a demon and ignore the worries of the people afraid of 'em. I know my master's teachings aren't wrong, but…I just can't see things his way. Is someone like me really fit for the Akitsu Somegorou name?"

Somegorou had taken a cheeky brat like Heikichi in and avenged his parents. Heikichi respected him and the Akitsu Somegorou name more than anything. But it was precisely because he held the name in such high regard that he believed himself unworthy of it. Heikichi's true self was simply too different from the image he tried to live up to.

"I first met Somegorou in Edo, more than twenty years ago now." Jinya, neither mocking Heikichi nor accepting his words, quietly began to recount the

past. As he explained an incident involving the emotions of a cuckoo hairpin, the corners of his mouth curved into a rare smile. “…And you know what he said to me then? He said demons will always be hunted creatures.”

Heikichi opened his eyes wide in disbelief. Such a thing was the reverse of his master’s current values. “No way. He did?”

“He did. He’s never been interested in killing harmless demons, but he was still quick to fight. We fought a bit back then, but it all could have been avoided if we’d just talked first. Looking back on it, I’d say we were both still too green.”

Heikichi was dumbfounded. He saw his master and Jinya as bastions of reason and wisdom. It felt strange to hear that wasn’t always the case.

“So my master wasn’t always the man he is now?”

“He wasn’t. But even back then, he was still Akitsu Somegorou, so I see no reason why you wouldn’t be worthy of the name. If anything, the fact that you’re worrying about such things at all proves you’re qualified.”

“That’s saying a bit much.” Heikichi spoke dismissively, but he couldn’t hide the relief on his face. Jinya’s words of reassurance hit home, not because Heikichi knew a demon could not lie but because he knew Jinya was not the kind of man to say something he didn’t mean.

“There’s no need to rush things, Utsugi. Your master became Akitsu Somegorou after he already had a decent amount of experience under his belt. You’d naturally feel inadequate compared to him, but that’s fine. He’s made his own choice on what path to follow, and you will make your own in time.”

Heikichi slowly chewed over Jinya’s words and nodded. He felt some of his hesitation fade away.

“Humans live short lives, but you still have a lot of time left. Worry all you like right now and gain all the experience you can. You’re still much too early in your journey to be comparing yourself against your predecessor.”

“…Yeah, you’re right.”

Whether or not to overlook demons was a question with no clear answer. Heikichi would likely continue to freeze up and agonize over what to do every time he was confronted with the impossible choice. But despite that, he wanted to be the one to call himself Akitsu Somegorou the Fourth.

He smiled confidently. He knew his master would choose to keep his composure in times like these.

“Hey, uh… Thanks for the pep talk or whatever.” Though embarrassed, he thanked Jinya in his own awkward way, then slapped himself on the cheeks for motivation. “All right, this is no time to be worrying myself sick! I’ve got my next job to get to. Which reminds me, have ya ever heard of the Shrine Maiden of Healing?”

Jinya hunted demons, so Heikichi figured he might know a thing or two even though the information wasn’t really demon-related.

“I have. There’ve been rumors about her for the last six months or so. I hear she’s received divine blessing and can relieve people’s pain just by touching them.”

“Oh, is that right? I didn’t know. I only just heard about her yesterday.”

“One of the perks of running a soba restaurant is that rumors find their own way to you.”

That made sense. Perhaps that was why he’d chosen to open a soba restaurant in the first place. Who could say? At any rate, it helped that he already knew about the topic. “Is that right? Anyway, my current job is from this Shrine Maiden of Healing herself.”

“Oh?”

“I’m actually going to meet her soon to hear more about the request, but I was thinking I’d do what I can to learn about her beforehand.”

“You’re in luck, then. I’ve looked into her a bit myself,” Jinya said. “Like I said, she’s supposedly blessed with the ability to relieve people’s pain through touch.

Diseased people are said to walk again on the very day she touches them. She's so elusive that no one knows where she lives. She appears without warning to heal people and accepts no monetary payment in return."

If that was all true, then she was the very image of a kindhearted saint. But Heikichi wasn't naive enough to accept all he heard at face value. "She sounds so perfect it's suspicious. Maybe she's a demon?"

"You think she might have an ability that lets her heal wounds? I guess that would make sense." Jinya seemed to be of the same mind, but his phrasing felt strange to Heikichi. If it was real, the ability to heal wounds would be a powerful one. There was no way Jinya would leave such an *appetizing* lead alone, so why hadn't he looked into it more?

"You haven't checked if she's a demon yourself? Weird. This sounds like something right up your alley."

"I did try to check, but I couldn't find her. One of the main things people say about her is that she's elusive. No one knows where she comes from or who she even is. The things I've told you about her so far are all I've been able to gather."

"Man… She just gets shadier and shadier," Heikichi said scornfully. Jinya gravely nodded in agreement.

If not even an expert like Jinya could find solid leads on this shrine maiden, then there had to be more to the story. At least based on the rumors, she didn't seem to pose any danger, but it was always better to be safe than sorry.

With a stiff expression, Heikichi stood up from his seat. "Well, it looks like meeting her is the only thing I can do."

"I'd love to come along if I can."

"Yeah, no. I'm not some brat who needs supervision. I was told to come alone, anyway."

"I see. A shame," Jinya said with some disappointment. Slightly worried, he

added, “Don’t let your guard down. This Shrine Maiden of Healing might prove to be a troublesome opponent despite her wholesome name.”

“I hear you. I’ll tell you what I find out tomorrow,” Heikichi said. Perhaps he felt indebted to Jinya for his help.

Jinya shook his head. “Unfortunately, I’ll have the restaurant closed tomorrow. I have a request of my own to work on.”

“You too? What’s it about?”

Sharing the details of a job that involved a client’s personal affairs was taboo, but rumors were already flying about this particular topic, so Jinya could share a bit of it. “Do you know about the Inverted Alley?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“I see. Well, neither do I.”

“The heck?” Heikichi thought he was being teased for a moment, but Jinya’s expression was as flat as always. He was serious. The fact that nobody knew anything about this Inverted Alley was its main mystery.

“It’s fine not to know,” Jinya said. “Those who do know all *supposedly* die unnatural deaths, which is why no one alive knows about it.”

“Ah, that kind of cliché is pretty standard for ghost stories.”

“Indeed. But I’ve been hearing a lot of this rumor lately, and just the other day, someone claimed to have seen the Inverted Alley. Pretty interesting, huh?”

More like strange. There was an inverted alley that nobody knew about, but if nobody knew about it, how could anyone know what it was when they encountered it? There couldn’t be rumors and an eyewitness account of something that nobody knew about. A great supernatural mystery appeared to be at play.

“You know, you always seem to find the weirdest things,” Heikichi said, giving Jinya a long look.

Jinya seemed to be enjoying himself. He'd said Somegorou used to be quick to fight, but Jinya certainly didn't seem to shy away from fighting either. Perhaps the two were birds of a feather.

"Well, whatever. I should get going. Later."

After a long conversation with a demon, Heikichi was leaving on what could be demon-hunting business. There was contradiction in his actions, but he felt he was coming away with a better understanding of his master's teachings.

If one left the main path in the eastern part of Kyoto, further east than Shijyou Street, they would soon find a ruined Buddhist temple.

In order to restore imperial rule and enforce a unity of faith and state, the Meiji government adopted Shintoism as its state religion and placed a ban on Shinto-Buddhist mixed faith, which had been standard up until then. They enacted a policy to separate the two religions from one another but didn't explicitly call for the abolition of Buddhism. Still, an anti-Buddhist wave swept the country, and many temples and religious artifacts were destroyed.

The temple Heikichi was visiting was one of those which had met with a tragic fate. It was left overgrown with weeds—a shadow of its former self. This was where he would meet the Shrine Maiden of Healing.

"It's a bit odd for a shrine maiden to be in a temple…" Shrine maidens were Shinto, not Buddhist. He voiced his thoughts to no one in particular, trying to calm his rising nerves. If his guesswork was right, then the Shrine Maiden of Healing was a superior demon. He'd fought many demons before, but not a single superior one yet.

"What am I getting so worked up for?" His body was stiff from nerves and his feet had frozen stiff, but he couldn't just stand in place forever. He fought back his hesitation. "Let's go."

According to the store owner, the Shrine Maiden of Healing would be waiting

for him in the main temple. He remained vigilant, his left hand ready to use an artifact spirit if needed, as he braved a step forward. He entered the main temple with his footwear still on, then saw the woman sitting there.

“Oh,” he couldn’t help but softly exclaim. The woman had beautiful black hair that streamed down to her waist. Her slightly droopy eyes looked youthful, and her face was slender. Her skin was a sickly pale white. She was so thin that she looked like she would break into pieces at a touch. She wore the red hakama of a shrine maiden with a white haori, and gold trinkets adorned her body. She looked at Heikichi with a face as expressionless as a Noh mask.

“Utsugi-sama, I presume?” Her crystal-clear voice halted his thoughts for a moment.

“O-oh, yes,” he managed to reply. The shrine maiden’s mystic air befuddled him, but she showed no sign that she minded his reaction and elegantly bowed her head.

“You have my sincerest gratitude for accepting my request.” She raised her head, and he saw her pupils, pristine black like the night, lock onto him. She was beautiful, yet she also looked sickly. She smiled, but there was no warmth.

“May I have your name?” he asked.

“But of course,” she said softly. “I am Azumagiku, though I am also known to some as the Shrine Maiden of Healing.”

Heikichi had no way of knowing it, but the woman before him resembled the very same shrine maiden who’d tried to remain the Itsukihime to her end.

2

Clear skies in morning,

afternoons to keep busy,

and the evening lull.

The sun sets for now,

but look up and you will see,

the stars take its place.

"PLEASE MAKE YOURSELF comfortable, Utsugi-sama." Azumagiku's voice was soft. She, the Shrine Maiden of Healing, didn't seem fully of this world. She sat with her back to a decayed wooden Buddhist statue. The wooden floorboards of the main temple were ice-cold.

"O-oh, sure." Heikichi did as she said, sitting formal seiza-style on the floor. Something about her aura made him think twice about sitting cross-legged. "So…you wanted to see me because ya—

you had a job for me, Azumagiku…sama?" Overwhelmed by her regal air, he stumbled over his words.

She responded with a calm but confident smile. "Hee hee. There is no need to be so formal. Though I may be called a shrine maiden, I hold no position whatsoever. I am not a woman you need to humble yourself for."

"O-oh, is that right? Um, feel free to speak normally with me as well."

"Alas, I normally speak in this manner."

Heikichi shook his head a few times to refocus himself. He might be talking to a demon, maybe even a superior one at that. He couldn't show weakness like this. What was more, it was pathetic to be so overwhelmed by a young-looking woman, even if her true age was unknown. What would the man who'd encouraged him, who'd called him worthy of the Akitsu Somegorou name, think if he were here?

"Is something the matter?" Azumagiku asked.

"No, not at all. Let's talk. I'm good friends with a demon, so I don't mind at least hearing whatever you have to say." Heikichi spoke firmly. He was a bit embarrassed to call Jinya a friend and not an acquaintance, but he felt a bit

proud to do so as well.

“I… Pardon?” She seemed bewildered by the unexpectedness of what he said.

“You’re a demon, right? And a superior one at that.” He wasn’t asking for confirmation. His voice was dispassionate, as though merely stating a fact.

“…Is it that obvious?”

“Kinda. Let’s just say this isn’t my first rodeo. A disciple of Akitsu should be able to tell at least this much.”

Her face visibly stiffened. It appeared his guesswork was right. With this, he’d won one over her. Seeing her calm facade crumble, he smiled victoriously.

“Will you slay me, then? You are a demon hunter, are you not?” Her eyes grew colder.

“I might. It depends. I figured I’d at least hear ya out first.”

“Is that acceptable? For you, that is.” She looked confused. It was his job to hunt spirits like her, so why hear her out at all?

“I’m not going to accept any jobs that bring harm to humans, of course. But I’d also rather not kill a demon unnecessarily.” It needn’t be said that the life of a human was more important than that of a demon, but he personally knew a demon kind enough to advise him to take his time and find his own answers in life. Just being a demon wasn’t reason enough to be killed.

“Is that so…?” she said.

“You don’t trust me?”

“No, I do. I do not have a right to distrust you, not when I am the one asking for your aid.” She regained the calm demeanor of a shrine maiden and politely bowed her head. She seemed genuine enough.

“Then what is it you want?”

Unhurriedly, she explained, “I need two things: to find somebody, and to have a bodyguard. But I will be the one doing the searching. I only need you to escort

me as I do so.”

“Why do you need a bodyguard? Is somebody targeting you?”

“No. Let’s just say I need an escort if I am to go outside.”

“What the heck?”

There was clearly something more going on, but her expression revealed no clues. Heikichi gave her a look, but she just calmly continued. “I was originally hoping to make my request while hiding my true identity.”

“I’d figured. Too bad I saw through you, eh?”

“Indeed. Would you be willing to undertake my request regardless?” On her face was a smile as still and calm as a lake’s surface.

Her request was strange. Demons were generally far stronger than humans. Even she should be absurdly powerful despite her feeble appearance. It was odd for her to request a bodyguard, and even odder for her to address that request to Heikichi. If he’d been a proper demon hunter, she might have been killed the moment she was outed as a demon.

“I figure I might as well ask… You do know what kind of guy I am, right?”

“I do,” she replied indifferently.

He’d never been much of a deep thinker. Rather than leave himself wondering, he cut straight to the point and asked, “Then why did you ask to see me? What made you think I wouldn’t just kill you right away?”

“Why…? Why indeed…” Her unruffled air faltered, and her gaze wandered through the air. Her answer sounded more like the first words that came to mind than an honest reply. “I simply…thought things would work if I asked for you. Because you’re a demon hunter.”

“Huh?”

“Yes. Yes, that’s it. I just knew someone who hunted demons would…” She got that far before returning to her senses and fixing her posture. “Pardon me.

From what I've heard secondhand, you seemed like someone who'd be willing to aid me."

Demons could not lie, but Heikichi did not think she was telling the truth. What would his master do in a situation like this? What about the soba restaurant owner? Heikichi tried his hardest to think, but nothing came to mind. All he knew was that Azumagiku was searching for someone while hiding the fact that she was a demon. Could he accept this job based on that alone?

"Even if you were to hire me as your bodyguard, I couldn't be around you all the time."

"I wouldn't need that much. Just having you when I go outside is enough." She smiled softly at his indecision. "Do you hesitate to accept because you don't know my aims?"

He found himself too flummoxed to reply. She'd read him like an open book, but she showed no sign she minded his distrustfulness. Her smile remained on her face. "In that case, come join me outside for a short while."

"Oh, thank you… Thank you…"

After Azumagiku arrived at a back-alley row house in Shijyou, an elderly man bowed to her so deeply that his head touched the ground. His face was creased with many wrinkles and on the verge of tears. With compassion in her eyes, she gazed at him, then touched the man without speaking. From the palm of her hand came a soft glow.

The change was obvious. The elderly man's face gradually eased into comfort as though a wicked spirit possessing him had been cast off. His eyes showed a deep sense of relief.

"Oh, Shrine Maiden-sama!"

"Me too, me too!"

It did not end there. A flock of people gathered around, all wanting their pain

to be eased as well.

“Don’t forget me!”

“Please, it hurts…so much…”

The many overlapping pleas sounded like the cries of the damned in hell. Heikichi could easily envision all the desperate voices demanding salvation as a ghastly crowd of lost souls, but Azumagiku did not scorn them. A calm smile remained on her face as she touched them all one by one. “But of course. Please be at ease, if only temporarily.”

Heikichi waited at her side in a daze as he watched everything unfold. He had followed her outside like she asked, only for her to dutifully begin healing people. Without pause, she touched them with her hands and granted them relief.

The rumors were true. She was undoubtedly the blessed Shrine Maiden of Healing who relieved people of pain through her touch. The residents of the row house circled around her, and she touched and healed one, then another, repeating the cycle over and over.

“Huh, so saints like her *do* exist,” Heikichi murmured so quietly that no one could hear. She wasn’t just granting them salvation, she was doing it with a smile, accepting and overlooking their ugliness as they incessantly and desperately demanded she aid them at once. *That* was the real miracle to Heikichi.

But while she did appear saintly, her selflessness felt almost eerie. Normal people couldn’t perform such a service without expecting anything in return. Or, at the very least, Heikichi couldn’t. For that reason alone, Azumagiku was an oddity.

Heikichi continued to stare at the unreal sight when he noticed a commotion outside the ring of people. He left Azumagiku’s side to check what was going on.

“Tasuke-san, come, come quickly! The shrine maiden is here!”

“I’m fine. Leave me out of it.”

Two old men, both of whom looked past their fifties, were arguing. No, arguing wasn’t quite right. One of the men was yelling for the other to come see the shrine maiden, but he—a man named Tasuke, it seemed—merely shook his head in response with a world-weary expression.

“I won’t stop you from going, but I’m fine. Really.” Tasuke didn’t have the distinct accent of Kyoto dwellers, so perhaps he hailed from somewhere else. He turned around and left on unsteady feet, not looking back once as he faded from view.

“Tasuke-san…! But why?”

Heikichi disregarded the commotion and looked back at Azumagiku. She was beautiful but felt terribly distant. He stood there idly for a time, just staring at her face in profile as she continued to heal people.

“So that’s what ya meant when you said you wanted a bodyguard, eh?”

The two had returned to the dim, abandoned temple after the sun had already set. As they sat across from one another, Heikichi let out an exasperated sigh.

“I apologize. I never quite know when to bring things to a close.”

The faint flame of the paper lantern flickered. Azumagiku seemed paler than before, perhaps out of exhaustion.

“It’s no surprise you haven’t found the one you’re searching for yet. You weren’t even trying to look.”

“You’re absolutely right. Once again, I apologize. I did not mean to keep you so long.”

After she had healed more people than he cared to count, he got fed up and

tried to make everyone leave. Only then did she come to her senses and stop healing.

She'd made no progress in her search.

Now he understood why she'd asked for a bodyguard, though. It wasn't for protection but to ward off the endless waves of people asking to be healed. If she were left alone, she could be stuck healing people forever. That was why she needed someone firm enough to break up the crowd after some time had passed.

"I'm fine. I'm more worried about you. Aren't ya tired after all that, Azumagiku-sama?"

"It's bearable. And please, just call me Azumagiku."

"Huh?"

"I said just Azumagiku is acceptable." She acted gracefully but proved to be stubborn in some ways. Heikichi felt a bit embarrassed to call a woman he'd just met by her name alone, but she seemed insistent he do so.

"Uhh… Well, all right, A-Azumagiku."

"Thank you." She made a genuine smile, something a long way off from her image as Shrine Maiden of Healing. He no longer sensed the eeriness he'd felt from her earlier. She seemed like just another ordinary young woman now, so he let his shoulders go slack.

"So, what was that thing ya did when you touched everyone earlier? Is that your ability?" Heikichi didn't expect a proper answer. A demon's ability was their trump card; it wasn't something they would reveal carelessly. But, to his surprise, she did just that.

"My ability is called *Azumagiku*, the same as my own name. It allows me to erase and alter memories. Despite what people call me, I am not a healer at all. I only erase painful memories and grant brief respite. I am capable of no more. Hence, I am but an azumagiku." Her eyes carried a deep sorrow. She wanted to

save many people, but all she could manage was a drop in the bucket. She clearly felt tortured by her own powerlessness.

Feeling guilty, Heikichi said, “Sorry. That was a tactless question.”

“Not at all. I do not mind.” She softly smiled.

In response to such a face, there was only one thing he could say. “I’ll accept your request. Obviously, I won’t be able to come around all the time, but I’ll try to drop by when I can.”

“Utsugi-sama…” Her eyes moistened with tears of gratitude.

He bashfully looked away, just the way he used to when he was younger. He hadn’t grown in this regard. It would be nice if he could act a little slicker, but oh well.

“Thank you so very much. It pains me to say this, but I cannot meaningfully compensate you.”

“That’s fine, I didn’t have my hopes up there. I’ll just think of being your bodyguard as a break from my usual work.” He made a big deal of not minding. His decision wasn’t an emotional one—this would benefit him as a form of training. Or at least, that was what he told himself. He had to admit it was a flimsy argument at best. “Oh, by the way, there’s something I’ve got to ask if I’m going to help you. Who ya lookin’ for anyway?” He kept his tone light so as not to pressure her. Her reply was unexpected, however.

“That is a good question. I do not know myself.” She made a dreadfully lonesome expression and gazed off wistfully into the distance. She looked like a child who had lost a place to call home.

“Huh? You…don’t know? But aren’t ya looking for them?”

“Indeed I am. I’ve always been looking for them. Someone… But I don’t know whom. I just know that I’ve always been looking for them.” Though she didn’t even blink, a single tear streamed down her face. “I beg you, Utsugi-sama, lend me your aid…”

Her plea was desperate. The sight of her was so heartrending that he was utterly at a loss for words.

“Whew, nice weather today. Really makes you wanna get things done.”

The day after he visited the Shrine Maiden of Healing, Heikichi went to Demon Soba, where he found Jinya and Toyoshige cleaning their shop fronts.

Thanks to the store’s recently developed red bean bread, business was booming at Mihashiya now. Its owner, Toyoshige, was thrilled about the success and became unexpectedly motivated to work.

“I take it business has been good?”

“That it has, and I owe it all to you, Kadono-san! I’ll repay the favor, no matter what; you just let me know when ya need something.”

“My part was small. Your success is the fruit of your own labors. But I’ll take you up on your offer. I’ll let you know if I ever need anything.”

Heikichi somewhat curiously watched the two chat until Jinya noticed him. “Oh, Utsugi.”

“Hey.” Heikichi’s tone was more upbeat than yesterday since the job had turned out to be nothing dangerous. “You’re headin’ out today, right? I was hoping to talk about somethin’ before that. Oh, and maybe nab a snack for later off ya.”

While he was cleaning, Toyoshige overheard and leapt right up to Heikichi with a gleam in his eyes. “If yer hankerin’ for a snack, might I recommend Mihashiya’s famous Nomari red bean bread?”

Heikichi’s eyes went cold, and he looked at Jinya rather than Toyoshige. “Hey, what’s this about ‘*Nomari* red bean bread’?”

“Well, how do I put it…? I was asked to think up a name for their new sweet, and before I knew it, it happened.”

Heikichi knew Jinya doted on his daughter a lot, but was he really this bad? Perhaps the man wasn't as rational a person as he'd first thought.

"…Well, all right. I'll have a look at your red bean bread later," Heikichi said.

"Thank you!" Toyoshige said.

Heikichi gave Jinya a look. The latter got the message and wordlessly nodded, then went inside his restaurant.

They sat in the closest available seats, and Heikichi spoke up first. "Have you heard of a flower called azumagiku?"

The question had been on his mind since yesterday. The Shrine Maiden of Healing had likened herself to an azumagiku. Heikichi only knew enough about flowers to know it was one; the deeper allusion behind her words was lost on him.

He figured Jinya might know something. Despite the man's stern appearance, he was deeply knowledgeable about flowers for some odd reason. To Heikichi's surprise, however, Jinya remained silent, as though confused why such a question would be asked.

"Er, I'm only asking ya 'cause I don't know the first thing about flowers. But you do, right?" Heikichi hastily added to his words, realizing his question was coming completely out of nowhere. Even then, Jinya remained silent, and his expression was blank.

The seconds seemed to creep forward at a crawl. Heikichi began to feel nervous.

"Azumagiku is another name for the miyakowasure," Jinya answered after a good, long while. He seemed back to his usual self now.

"The miyakowasure…?" Heikichi repeated. It was an odd name, considering that miyakowasure literally meant "a capital forgotten."

"It's a dark-blue or blueish-purple flower that blooms from late spring to early summer. Long ago, then-emperor Jyuntoku lost a war and was exiled to the

island of Sado. He sobbed for days on end until one day he found a flower so beautiful it temporarily made him forget the capital he once called home. From then on, the flower was called miyakowasure."

"Wow, you're a real flower expert."

"Nonsense. I'm just repeating what I've heard from someone else. So what's this got to do with the Shrine Maiden of Healing?"

Heikichi nearly jumped out of his seat. Too shocked to speak, he stared and wondered how Jinya could have possibly made the connection.

Jinya sighed in exasperation. "You met with her just yesterday, didn't you? It's logical to think this has something to do with it."

"O-oh, yeah, I guess so. Well, the Shrine Maiden of Healing called herself an azumagiku, so I was just curious what kind of flower it was."

"She did? She's quite sophisticated, then. For a shrine maiden who grants brief comfort, a miyakowasure is quite an apt comparison."

"Oooh."

The flower temporarily made Jyuntoku forget his home capital, just as the shrine maiden erased painful memories and granted a temporary reprieve. Heikichi understood what she meant now. It was moments like these when he felt keenly how inexperienced he still was. If he had been a little more knowledgeable, then maybe he could have replied to her allusion with something cool and tasteful yesterday.

"Thanks for the help. One more thing, though: What would you do if you were trying to search for someone?" Heikichi asked.

"Me? Well… I guess I'd look for clues, asking around and so on. Casting a wide net is important."

"Figures…" The problem was that Azumagiku didn't know whom she was looking for. You couldn't look for clues if you didn't at least know who you were after.

“So what did you think?” Jinya suddenly asked.

Caught mid-thought, Heikichi blanked out. Jinya’s eyes were calm but also discerning. Heikichi felt like he was being interrogated. “About what?”

“The Shrine Maiden of Healing. What did you think when you saw her?”

When he first laid eyes on her, her pale skin made Heikichi think she was some sickly woman. But that wasn’t what Jinya was asking. He was asking if Azumagiku was a demon or a human.

“She’s a superior demon, but I don’t think she would harm a human.”

“I see…” Jinya’s reply was weak, as if he weren’t entirely pleased. He brought a hand to his chin and looked down, seemingly lost in thought. He soon lifted his face and, with a worryingly serious expression, said, “That’s fine and all, but don’t let your guard down.”

“I really don’t think she’s someone I need my guard up for, though…”

“Even so.” Jinya remained firm and insistent.

Heikichi assumed Jinya was only wary because he hadn’t personally met Azumagiku. His strong phrasing irritated him slightly, but Heikichi thought it was just proof he cared. Heikichi swallowed back his complaints, then stood up.

“I better get going.” His curtness might have been out of lingering irritation.

He’d promised to show up as Azumagiku’s bodyguard today. After buying some snacks to give her, he headed for the abandoned temple.

Akitsu Somegorou the Third cared about Heikichi, which was precisely why he hadn’t shared much information about Magatsume with his disciple. Heikichi knew next to nothing about Himawari and Jishibari. He decided the Shrine Maiden of Healing was a harmless demon and didn’t bother describing her in detail to Jinya.

And that was his mistake. He should have known to distrust the demon

named after a flower.

“Utsugi-sama.”

When Heikichi returned to the abandoned temple, he found the Shrine Maiden of Healing sitting formally in the same location as the previous day. She greeted him with a soft smile, moving only the corners of her mouth. Her expression did not carry much emotion.

Azumagiku was conventionally attractive, but Heikichi was not fond of the way she carried herself. She was eerily selfless, and her smiles could do with more warmth. Nomari’s were much friendlier…

Heikichi shook the worldly thought out of his head. Even if he wasn’t being paid, he’d accepted this job and had a responsibility to see it through without daydreaming.

“Is something the matter?” Azumagiku asked, noticing his strange behavior.

Though embarrassed, he tried his hardest to keep a straight face. He tried mimicking the deadpan look of the soba restaurant owner, but unfortunately had little success as the corners of his mouth twitched considerably. “No. I’m fine.”

“Is that so…?”

The air felt awkward. Not sure what else to do, Heikichi pulled out a bundle he’d brought. “Oh, uh, I brought some sweets as a gift. Something called Nomari red bean bread. It’s been really popular lately, so I thought you might like some.”

“No way, really?!”

This time, he was the one to look at her with cold eyes. Her composed shrine maiden facade vanished without a trace as she gleefully clenched her fists in front of her like a girl in her teens might.

“Ahem. Pardon my outburst…” After noticing his stare, she cleared her throat

and adjusted her posture. Unfortunately for her, any shred of her formerly dignified air was beyond recovery.

“What was that?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“That just now, whatever it was. Don’t tell me you’ve been putting on an act this whole time.”

Unable to bear his harsh gaze, she spilled the beans while pouting like a scolded child. “I just figured acting like that was more ‘shrine maidenly,’ you know?”

The Shrine Maiden of Healing turned out to be far less divine than she let on. His mental image of her completely crumbled away.

“Well… Whatever floats your boat, I guess,” he said.

The once stiff and formal atmosphere completely loosened up. Azumagiku ate the Nomari red bean bread while grinning ear-to-ear. She looked like a completely different person from the miracle-granting woman of yesterday, but this was likely her true self.

“I don’t get to eat sweets often because I’m stuck inside. Going out just makes what happened yesterday start over again,” she said between bites.

“Either eat or talk. Don’t do both.”

“What’s with you? You’re ruder than you were yesterday.”

“Why do you think that might be?”

She chuckled softly and looked away.

Her sudden shift in behavior surprised him, but truth be told, he much preferred her this way compared to her stuffy shrine maiden facade. She felt more like your average town girl and less like some being beyond understanding.

“I guess it’s all whatever… Hey, wait. Don’t tell me your request the other day

was also a lie?”

“Rude. I didn’t lie about anything. I really do need a bodyguard, and I really am looking for someone…someone whose name and face I can’t remember. All I know is I’ve been looking for them for a long time.” Her tone turned emotional toward the end, and she smiled weakly at Heikichi.

He didn’t think she was trying to deceive him. He had nothing concrete to base his belief on, but he didn’t feel like her evident sincerity could be faked.

“Hmm. You don’t remember anything about this person?” he asked.

“…I don’t.”

“Then you’re kinda out of luck, aren’t ya?” He crossed his arms, wondering how they could possibly move forward with so little to work from, but her next words took him by surprise.

“It’s fine. I just need to see them.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll know it’s them right away if I lay eyes on them. I’m sure of it. After all, I was born to meet them.” Her voice was languid and weary, but also packed full of emotion. Heikichi could not understand the depth of her feelings—not because she hid them, but because there was nothing he believed in so strongly himself. He had nothing he could say he was *born* to do.

He glanced at her face from the side. In profile, she looked so much more beautiful now than when she was posing as a composed shrine maiden.

And yet, she seemed so terribly lonely.

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While Heikichi was meeting with the Shrine Maiden of Healing, Jinya was visiting a back-alley row house for a job of his own.

“…Oh, it’s you.” The client was an old man somewhere in his mid-fifties or early sixties. He was asking Jinya to look into—and if possible, bring an end to—

the Inverted Alley after the death of a friend who'd entered it. "Sorry fer makin' ya come all this way."

"It's fine. Can you tell me about the alley in detail?"

"That's the problem, I don't know the first thing 'bout it," the man said apologetically.

The client had no information to share on the Inverted Alley. Jinya had done some preliminary investigating himself and came out practically empty-handed.

The tale of the Inverted Alley was a chilling one. Anyone who ever heard what it was would endlessly shiver out of fear, then die before three days passed. The first victim who saw the Inverted Alley went mad before passing away. All who witnessed his ravings were too afraid to repeat what he said, no matter who asked. Eventually they too departed the mortal coil, and just like that, all who knew of the Inverted Alley died, with only its name remaining to be passed on. Such was the dreadful tale of the Inverted Alley…

That was all Jinya could gather on the subject. In short, only the name "Inverted Alley" was known. Not a soul alive knew what it actually was. Or at least, that was how the story of the Inverted Alley went.

The old man said, "Talk of the Inverted Alley is cursed, it is. All who 'ear of it die. No one alive knows what the alley's s'posed to be. And o' course, that goes for me too."

"But you know *where* it is."

"That I do. Don't know how, *shouldn't* know how, but I know where it is. Don't know why, just do."

The old man claimed that he learned where the Inverted Alley was and that his friend lost his life after going to it. He couldn't possibly have known it was the Inverted Alley without seeing it himself, and yet he was certain it killed his friend, without knowing the reason for his own certainty.

The old man trembled, his face contorting with fear. It did not seem like an

act but genuine terror.

“Is that so? Could you lead the way for me, then?” Jinya asked.

“I daren’t bring you all the way there myself, but I’ll take you somewhere close.”

“That’ll be enough.”

There was nothing Jinya could do if he didn’t at least go there himself to investigate. He didn’t feel any fear, despite all the unknowns surrounding the supernatural tale. After all, ghost stories that hinged on being unknowable were not rare, and almost always made up. The Inverted Alley was likely nothing more than an urban legend. But it was odd for a fabricated story to become this widespread. Jinya was sure something, or someone, was lurking behind the scenes.

Jinya was trying to investigate as many supernatural incidents as he could. He believed this would eventually let him stumble upon one that would lead him to Magatsume.

He was led past the back-alley row houses to an area filled with shrines and temples. Not far from there was an alley in the shadows of the surrounding buildings, out of the light’s reach.

The old man had already fled out of fright, but as far as Jinya could tell, the alley was completely normal, and he didn’t sense the presence of any demons. He groaned, thinking he had hit a dud, when a different old man abruptly appeared.

“Excuse me, what business do you have here?” The voice came from a short, elderly man with a crooked back. He was around the same age as the client from earlier. The man seemed suspicious of Jinya, perhaps because he had been lurking deep in thought near a dark alley.

“I apologize. I’m currently looking into something called the ‘Inverted Alley.’”

“…Is that so?”

“Yes. Some people have died recently, and many folks are saying it’s because of this Inverted Alley thing. I’ve been tasked to investigate it.”

Jinya decided to be candid about what he was here for, hoping to avoid seeming suspicious and to potentially gain information. His decision seemed to prove wise, as the suspicion on the man’s face was replaced by a complicated expression that was likely exasperation, weariness, or simply pain. “I see. You’re wasting your time, though. What you see here is just an ordinary alley. The Inverted Alley doesn’t even exist.”

The old man’s words came across as strange. Up until now, all Jinya had heard about the Inverted Alley was that it was real, but no one could know about it in detail. But here this man was, stating cleanly that it did not exist. Such a statement could only be made by someone who *did* know about it in detail.

“Do you know something?” Jinya asked.

After a brief moment of hesitation, the man nodded and answered, “…I do.”

Jinya was sure the man was being genuine. Perhaps he even knew the whole picture of what was going on. The air with which he carried himself was just that somber.

“I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. I am Kadono, and I run a soba restaurant over on Sanjyou Street. Could I have your name?”

“Tasuke’s the name. If you want to ask questions, you should go to the shrine nearby.”

“Thank you.”

Tasuke turned around and began to walk away. Jinya didn’t try to stop him. If he asked, the man would probably tell him all he wanted to know, but Jinya had no way of validating that information with what little he had on hand. It would be better to look into things his own way.

For starters, he took a deliberate step into the alley. He stopped before taking a second, though.

“Wha…?” There hadn’t been anything there a moment ago. He was *sure* he hadn’t let his guard down. And yet, right before his eyes was a black shadow close enough to reach out and touch.

Jinya instantly reached for Yarai, but the black shadow wriggled to life faster. Its vague humanlike shape began to crumble, spreading out like a murky blot.

“Ah.”

Unable to dodge or even raise his voice, Jinya was enveloped by the shadow.

Who was to say how much time passed?

He was asleep. That much he understood. But his body was so heavy that he couldn’t summon the urge to wake up.

“…-ta, it’s morning already…wake…”

He felt his consciousness slowly rouse. It was a warm morning, one that threatened to lull him back to sleep. “Nomari…?” he groaned.

He wanted to sleep forever if he could, but of course he could not. Fighting his lethargy, he opened his heavy eyes and sat up. He was about to thank his daughter for waking him when he noticed that something was off.

“Good morning.”

The one waking him had long, captivating black hair and skin as white as snow. He was enthralled by her sweet smile until his mind slowly grew clearer and registered the impossibility.

“Jeez, Jinta. You can’t do anything without your big sister.”

Time came to a halt.

Somewhere in the recesses of his heart, he had longed to see her again. But now that she was here before his eyes, his heart was bewildered.

The person before him was someone who couldn’t possibly be here.

The Itsukihime who offered prayers to Kadono’s god, Mahiru-sama.

Jinya spoke the name that he had once called her in the past: “…Shirayuki?”

How could she, gone from this world, be in front of him now?

Side Story:
Special Liquor Cup

PEOPLE REFLECTED ON THE PAST more often as they grew older, and demons were no exception. Though Jinya's body didn't change, he could feel his heart aging with time. Many things had slipped his memory over the course of his long journey, but there would always be some things he would never forget.

Take, for instance, the days he spent with Shirayuki and the time he lived with Suzune. He remembered the precious moment he met his first love, and he recalled the instant his family turned into sworn enemies. Memories both happy and bitter remained in his heart. But alongside such colorful memories were uneventful, ordinary days too. It was only when he looked back on such days that he realized they had also been precious to him. Having grown older, he now understood that you only realized how dear something was after it was gone.

His interactions with Akitsu Somegorou were a perfect example of this.

"Hey, wanna go look at some cherry blossoms?"

It was just around the time when gossip of a Shrine Maiden of Healing was beginning to circulate. The customers of Demon Soba spoke of a divinely blessed woman who could heal any and all pain. One couldn't help but be curious about her—especially on the off chance she was real.

Jinya's regular customers would sometimes try to rope him into the conversations, saying things like "Being a father takes its toll sometimes, doesn't it? Maybe you'd like to meet this shrine maiden yourself." He would noncommittally avoid a response, but it'd be a lie to say he wasn't interested. Setting aside what he thought about the healing ability, the fact that there was a woman nearby with such an ability made him suspect Magatsume was pulling strings somewhere.

Jinya began searching around Kyoto for the shrine maiden. He found some talk of her here and there, but there was an unnatural lack of concrete leads. He met people who claimed to have encountered her, but none of them could describe where she went or even what she looked like—not out of a desire to hide information from him, but simply because they couldn't remember.

Feeling uneasy, he widened his search but still ended up with no clues. The only silver lining was that he hadn't heard any rumors of people being hurt by the Shrine Maiden of Healing. In the end, he concluded the rumor wasn't worth pursuing and left it be.

Deep inside, however, he continued to think about the case. Part of him recalled another shrine maiden from his past, along with many painful thoughts that came with her memory. He remembered Suzune as well. Perhaps that was why he had bothered to chase the rumor so long in the first place.

One day around that time, Somegorou waltzed into the restaurant and, without so much as a greeting, suggested they go look at some cherry blossoms.

"Where did this idea come from all of a sudden?" Jinya asked.

"Oh, nowhere really. I just felt like seein' some cherry blossoms. Let's leave Heikichi and Nomari behind for the day and just head out, us two guys." His invitation didn't seem connected to a job he was working on or anything. It was just what it appeared to be—an invitation to see some cherry blossoms.

Kyoto had several locations well known for their cherry blossoms. Cherry blossoms were one of the many allures of spring, after all. The only problem was that the season for cherry blossoms, and even plum blossoms, was already over. All that could be seen at this time of the year was empty branches.

However, Jinya was half dragged outside before he could mention that. Somegorou seemed to remain energetic no matter how old he got, always leading Jinya by the nose. Jinya didn't really mind, though. The man's high-handed, forceful nature was what allowed the two of them, demon and demon

hunter, to be friends. That being said, Jinya could do without all the trouble Somegorou occasionally caused him.

“Wow, this area looks completely different, eh?” Somegorou gawked at his surroundings as the pair walked along Shijyou Street.

After Shijyoubashi Bridge was destroyed in a flood, it was replaced by an iron lattice girder bridge. One could also see Western-style gas lamps installed in some locations here and there. Having been raised in Kadono, an iron-producing village, Jinya knew how hard it was to manufacture iron and was astonished at the amount being used.

“Yeah. I wonder if we’ll keep seeing foreign influence make its way into Kyoto.”

“As a Kyotoite, born and raised, I’m both happy and sad to see it change. I’m sure it’s all for the better, though.” Somegorou sighed with a complicated smile.

Jinya had felt similarly conflicted before. It was nice to know one’s quality of life would improve, but there was a sense of melancholy in knowing that familiar places would never look quite the same again.

The two continued to make small talk as Somegorou led the way. Eventually they arrived on Shijyou’s main street. For a moment, Jinya thought he was being led to Kitano Shrine to see the plum blossoms there, but instead he was brought to a storefront.

The store’s signboard read “Aidaya Choujirou.” The place was located on a busy corner with tea houses and sundries stores nearby, and it seemed to get good business. However, not a single flower—or tree, for that matter—was in sight.

“From what I’ve been told, this shop has been open since the Genroku era (1688–1704 AD). The place has certainly got class,” Somegorou said.

On his urging, Jinya followed him into the shop. Simple earthenware goods were stocked tightly together alongside brilliant, vivid porcelain and more. The

place seemed to deal in pottery and the like, selling things such as teacups and liquor cups as well as non-eating utensils such as pots and decorations. They also had items that looked like antiques. An artifact spirit user like Somegorou was probably intimately familiar with places like these.

“What about the cherry blossoms?” Jinya asked.

“All in good time,” Somegorou said. He reached out and grabbed a nearby item, looking it over carefully. “Mmm, I’d expect no less from Aidaya. They deal with only the best of the best potters.”

“Is that so?”

“Absolutely. Can’t you tell from lookin’? No, wait, I guess this kind of stuff ain’t up your alley. Tell me what you think of this, though.”

He showed Jinya a reddish-brown liquor cup. Unfortunately, Jinya had no eye for such things. He felt it looked a little better crafted than the cups he usually used, but that was about it. He had no particular remarks to make on its quality.

“This here’s Bizen ware,” Somegorou said. “They don’t work with glaze; they use only earth and fire to give it a rustic feel. Liquor drunk from this will be more fragrant and taste smoother.”

“Oh? Now you’ve got my attention.”

“Ha ha, I figured you’d like that.”

Any heavy drinker would want a cup that made their liquor taste better. Jinya sized up the cup again and thought that it indeed had a certain dignified air that he’d somehow missed before.

“They also have Kutani ware here. They’re colorful with bold designs, making ’em easy to appreciate. They have ties to metalwork as well, and by extension, the Akitsu.”

As Somegorou said, several small bowls lined up were vivid and eye-catching. Apparently one of the draws of Kutani ware was that they were painted. They showed images of mountains, birds, flowers, and rivers, making them both

functional utensils and works of beauty to be appreciated.

Somegorou continued to explain the traits of different kinds of pottery, making jokes all the while. Looking back on it, Ofuu had taught Jinya the names of flowers in a similar way. The nostalgic memory made him more invested. Though he hadn't originally been interested at all, Jinya was listening intently by the end.

"What d'ya think? Pretty interesting stuff, right?"

"Yeah, knowing these things' background really changes how you see them. I'm starting to want a few for myself."

"Glad to hear it. Just be careful, though. Some real pottery aficionados put themselves in debt just buying a single plate."

"I have a daughter to think about. I wouldn't go that far."

"I'd certainly hope not," Somegorou teased with a grin. Then he gestured to a spot in the shop with his chin. "That there is what we're after today."

When Jinya saw the many items laid out there, his eyes went wide.

"Nabeshima ware. These plates depict brushwood fences and cherry blossoms. Wonderful, aren't they?"

The brushwood fences on the plates were blue, and the cherry blossoms red. Brushwood fences and cherry blossoms had been paired together throughout history, and they were recreated faithfully and beautifully on the plate. Even a know-nothing like Jinya could tell this was a real piece of art.

"So this was what you meant by going to see cherry blossoms," Jinya said. Depicted on all kinds of pottery before him were cherry blossoms in bloom. Jinya wouldn't have thought much of it all before, but he could appreciate these works now that he knew their value.

Cherry blossoms had been a flower loved by the Japanese since time immemorial. Their brilliance in bloom and their ephemeral elegance when their petals scattered matched the aesthetic sense of the Japanese well. It was also

believed that they housed Ukanomitama, the god of foodstuffs, and that the cherry blossom design would act as a form of prayer and bring plentiful harvest. The many plates and pots included several novel depictions as well as the more realistic ones, such as ocean waves sending cherry blossom petals scattering or a simplified pattern using the cherry blossom shape, to name a few. But they were all undoubtedly made with plenty of care and prayer.

“It doesn’t matter if we’ve missed cherry blossom season. These cherry blossoms will stick around all year, as they did a hundred years ago and will still do a hundred years from now.” One or two hundred years was nothing for pottery. Somegorou was simply stating facts, but the deeper meaning behind his words was clear. Jinya couldn’t help but feel uplifted.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Jinya kept his reply brief.

Somegorou grinned triumphantly. He knew his message wouldn’t go unreceived.

Out of exasperation and slight embarrassment, Jinya sighed.

The next day, Somegorou came to Demon Soba for his usual lunch, but Jinya didn’t charge him this time. Yesterday’s experience had been well worth the price of a meal. His pain had been eased without needing to rely on the likes of some dubious Shrine Maiden of Healing.

“Ooh, thanks for the treat.”

“Not at all. I enjoyed yesterday.”

Somegorou grinned triumphantly. Jinya had changed greatly over the years: He’d become able to express gratitude plainly and unreservedly. As his longtime friend, Somegorou likely recognized Jinya’s change more than anyone else.

“I’m glad to hear that. Have you tried out that thing you bought yet?”

“Not yet.”

“Oh, well, we can’t have that. I’m sure you want nothing more than to have a

drink while you gaze at some cherry blossoms.”

Jinya had bought a liquor cup that caught his eye yesterday at Aidaya Choujirou—not the Bizen ware that Somegorou said made liquor taste better, but a Nabeshima ware depicting cherry blossoms. Apparently, the petals would seem to sway inside the cup when liquor was poured in it. It was quite the tasteful piece. There was a decanter that went with the cup, but the cup alone cost a hefty price, so he hadn’t opted for the full set.

“No, I think I’ll save the cup for a special moment. It’s proof of your kindness, after all.”

Although Jinya had been too cheap to buy the full set, this was the first time he’d bought a drinking cup whose full background he knew. The cup meant something to him. He was hesitant to use it right away, especially because of its high price. For the time being, it seemed it would remain on the shelf.

“Oh?” For some reason, Somegorou gave him a questioning look.

Jinya was confused. Despite all his aloofness, Somegorou was kind and considerate, and so Jinya assumed he’d dragged him out to give him a change of mood. Sure, Somegorou had said he was sad about the way Kyoto was changing, and he’d probably wanted to find solace in some changeless cherry blossoms, but he was also giving Jinya a much-needed break after the whole Shrine Maiden of Healing business left him depressed. At least, that was what Jinya assumed.

He explained all that to Somegorou, who awkwardly averted his gaze.

“…Sorry. I actually just wanted to take a breather myself.” He began to prattle on, trying to hide his inner panic. “Ever since Heikichi got capable enough to handle his own work, I’ve had more free time than I know what to do with! I was looking for ways to kill time when I heard through the grapevine that Aidaya had some good wares in stock. I thought, oh, maybe I’ll go window-shopping then, but doing that alone is a tad embarrassing, so I figured I’d drag you along since you’d be all lonely now that Nomari-chan’s all grown up.”

In short, Jinya was no more than Heikichi's replacement. He'd read too deeply into things. Somegorou looked at him apologetically, but really Jinya had nobody but himself to blame. He felt a little embarrassed that he'd been so overly thankful for no real reason. "Well… I guess things like that happen."

"I suppose so."

The two made no effort to keep talking about it. Doing so would only embarrass them both even more. They'd seen a new side of one another, and that was more than enough.

Somegorou cleared his throat, acting as though their just-concluded exchange hadn't happened. Jinya calmed down and did the same. Perhaps because of their age, the two could both control their facial expressions well.

"You know, it'd be a waste if the right moment never came around and that cup you bought didn't get used," Somegorou said.

"You have a point." It'd be a waste indeed. Jinya was thinking ahead, trying to come up with an excuse to use the cup, when he had an idea. This whole thing started because of Heikichi's growth, so maybe using it with him would be a good idea. "Does Utsugi drink?"

"Hm, don't think he's tried yet."

"Then let's throw him a banquet. We can serve him a drink with the cup."

Cherry blossoms could represent coming of age. That once-cheeky brat was now a full-fledged man. A cherry-blossom cup was perfect to celebrate his growth.

"Oh, now that's an idea."

And so, a banquet was scheduled without the guest of honor's knowledge. Though he was using Heikichi as an excuse more than anything, Jinya was genuinely happy about the young man's growth. He looked forward to sharing a drink with him and maybe listening to his grumblings.

Somegorou agreed. Though he lamented the changes in Kyoto, he was deeply

proud of his disciple’s own development. “I’ll prepare some good liquor for the occasion, then.”

“Thanks.”

Rumors of a Shrine Maiden of Healing could still be heard every day. Some customers were fixated on the topic, but Jinya no longer bothered to investigate it.

A new cup joined the others on the restaurant’s shelf. As it turned out, it wasn’t only Bizen ware that made liquor taste better.

Footnotes

Late Night Tales of Demonic Swords—Mikage: The Spirit

[1] An old Japanese unit of measurement. One shaku is equal to 0.9942 feet.

[2] A time measurement used only in the Edo Period. One koku equals roughly two hours.

[3] An old Japanese unit of measurement. One ken is equal to six shaku, or about five feet eleven inches.

A Tale of a Mother Goddess and Manju

[4] An old Japanese currency. One rin is equal to 0.001 yen.

[5] An old Japanese currency. One sen is equal to 0.01 yen.

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